

## Normal is Overrated by Kamiye Celeek

**Category:** Stranger Things, 2016

**Genre:** Family, Romance

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Eleven/Jane H., Mike W., Will B.

**Pairings:** Mike W./Eleven/Jane H.

**Status:** In-Progress

**Published:** 2019-01-15 13:01:01

**Updated:** 2019-01-30 15:57:04

**Packaged:** 2019-12-12 20:09:25

**Rating:** T

**Chapters:** 16

**Words:** 29,504

**Publisher:** [www.fanfiction.net](http://www.fanfiction.net)

**Summary:** Jane Hopper-Byers is still adjusting to having a loving, caring family. Then her brother introduces her to his three best friends and she can't help but feel awkward, especially around Mike. It's not a normal love story by any stretch, but hey. Normal is overrated. Updates daily.

## 1. Will and Jane

"...and this is your room, I guess."

Jane looked around at the barren space. There was a closet, a bed, and a dresser, but not much else. She glanced at Will, who swallowed nervously.

"Look, we'll fix it up and make it look nice. And you can make it look however you want. It'll be great. You, me, Mom, Jonathan, and Hopper."

"Family."

"Yeah. Family."

It was hard to believe the girl who now stood in the doorway of the former guest room was the same girl who, scarcely a year prior, had saved his life. And now she was moving in to be his *sister*. If you had told him that a year ago, he would've called you a mouth-breather and told you to shut up. Now, though? Now he welcomed her with open arms. The nervousness he felt was from the fact that she was obviously overwhelmed.

Well, that and the amount of shit his friends would give him over this.

*You have a girl living in your house that's **not** related to you?!*

Imagining the looks on their faces made him smile a bit as Jane entered the bedroom, looking around with her wide brown eyes. Will headed down the hall to his own room, which was far more personalized than his soon-to-be sister's. He knew that he'd likely be roped into helping decorate sometime soon, and the thought of that wasn't too unpleasant.

"Will! Jane! Time for dinner!"

His mother's voice drifted up the stairs and he headed down, Jane right behind them. Will took his seat and Jane took the one right next to him, and there they were: the Hopper-Byers family.

Joyce, Hopper, Jonathan, Will, and Jane.

The five of them against the rest of the world.

"Mom, I was wondering something," Jonathan stated, setting down his fork.

"What is it?"

"We're putting Jane in school, right?"

Silence.

"Not smart enough," Jane mumbled, staring at her food. "And too weird."

"You're plenty smart," Joyce reassured her. "And I promise you—once we get you all caught up with everyone else, we'll send you to school with Will and Jonathan."

Jane smiled and Will couldn't help but smile back.

That smile had been full of relief and fear a year ago...

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He'd been on his way home from a D&D session at Mike's that night—November 6, 1983. Will had already split off from Dustin and Lucas, both of whom were heading towards their own houses to get some sleep before the living hell known as 'middle school'. In fact, he'd briefly beaten Dustin in a race and won X-Men 134 from his curly-haired friend. Excitement over winning the comic fair and square almost made him crash into a tree at the side of the road.

Then there'd been growling. He'd turned to see a snarling stray dog—the kind that had turned feral already—and quickly ditched his bike in favor of running for his life. In moments of panic, people tend not to look or pay attention to where they're going, and Will was *not* an exception to that rule. He'd kept running, even after the growling had stopped and the dog gave up the chase.

He didn't stop until he lost his footing and fell down a steep embankment, into some freezing water below. It was deep and dark,

and his backpack was weighing him down and the water was too cold for him to swim to shore. All he could do was feel the water filling his lungs as he tried to scream for help. The world around him started to fade and he started to slip away.

Next thing he knew, he was being given CPR by a girl with a buzz cut.

"Please," he heard her plead in a soft voice. "Live."

Will sat up, coughing up water and getting a good look at his rescuer. She wore a pale pink dress with a white collar and a blue windbreaker, both of which were thoroughly soaked. She was panting and he knew that she'd pulled him from the water. She'd saved his life.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"Eleven," she whispered.

"I'm Will. How did you save me?"

"Swam. Papa says swimming is good."

She spoke in short, choppy sentences that he typically attributed to three-year-old Holly Wheeler. Even though she was about his age, based on her size. Her eyes were big and brown—the kind of eyes that instantly made you want to protect her. And Will knew that he would. She'd saved him and it was the very *least* he could do in return.

"I need to get home," he told her. "To my mom and brother and stepdad."

"What is... stepdad?" He furrowed his brow; okay, that was weird.

"A stepdad is like... when a mom and a dad aren't together anymore, the mom—or sometimes the dad—will marry another man and that man will be your stepdad."

"Oh."

"Eleven, where do you live?"

She waved towards a hill. He swallowed; clearly, something was wrong.

"Can you take me there? I need to get warm."

Eleven nodded and helped him to his feet. Together, they walked towards where she'd pointed and arrived at a cabin. A cabin that had clearly seen better days.

"Where are your parents?"

"Mama's gone. Papa is... bad."

*Bad.* It was a word she often used to describe her life.

Her Papa? *Bad.*

The house she grew up in? *Bad place.*

The people who she'd met? *Bad men.*

"Maybe you can come with me when I go home," Will offered gently.

"My mom is good, and my stepdad and brother are good."

"Good." She fixed him with a look. "Will is good."

"Eleven is good."

She smiled, a real, genuine smile that made him smile back instantly. How could he not? He ended up falling asleep by a small fire she made in the fireplace, and she'd bring him food. Where she got it, he didn't know and he didn't want to know. But what he *did* know was that he and Eleven stayed together for a week and he learned things about her.

Why is your hair so short?

*Papa hates long hair.*

Do you live alone?

*Papa is bad.*

Do you know where your mama is?

*Gone.*

At first, she'd sit a few feet away from him. She didn't like being touched and she was jumpy. But over that week, she'd warmed up to him and he'd stopped calling her Eleven. Instead, he called her El. She seemed to like that more than Eleven.

After a week, though, he knew he had to get home.

He and Eleven trekked through the woods, avoiding ponds and the like, until they emerged across the street from his house. It was a pretty two-story place that his mother and stepfather had bought shortly after their wedding. Seeing that house made him relieved and he ran towards the door, banging on it furiously.

"I'm coming!" he heard Jonathan say. His older brother opened the door and stared. "*Will?!!*"

"Hi. I'm home."

Not twenty minutes later, Joyce and Hopper came home, too. Both were happy to see him and nobody seemed to notice El fading into the background until Will reached out his hand to her.

"This is El. She saved me and helped me get home. Can she stay with us?"

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"Will?"

He looked up to see Jane in the doorway of his room. He was busy doing his homework and preparing for Halloween.

"What's up, El?"

"I'm scared."

"Of what?"

"I'm scared of... this." She gestured all around her and Will instantly understood.

"El, we're not getting rid of you anytime soon. You're part of our family now and that's that."

"Sister."

"That's right—you're my sister."

Over the past year, through legal battles with Martin Brenner (Jane's father), tracking down Terry Ives (her catatonic birth mother), and trying to bring Jane into their home, Will and his family had begun teaching her things that most thirteen-year-olds knew. Like math, basic history, reading, writing... all that good stuff. And yet, through all of it, Will hadn't breathed a *word* about Jane to any of his friends. They could be such *shits* when it came down to it and he wanted his sister to be more comfortable around people before anything else.

Naturally, she'd warmed up to Will first. After a week together in the cabin, there was no way she wouldn't have. Then, shockingly, she'd bonded with Hopper, who taught her words that she hadn't known before and brought her Eggo waffles. Which, of course, were now her favorite food. Joyce had been next, and she'd shown Jane nothing but kindness and motherly love—something that Will knew Jane had lacked growing up. Jonathan had been a different story; he found it difficult to connect with his new little sister.

She still didn't speak to him much.

"You'll get the hang of it, El. I promise."

"Promise." She smiled again. *Promise* was her favorite word.

"Yeah, promise."

"I'll be normal."

"Normal is overrated. Trust me."

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**AH. Will and El being brother and sister gives me life.**

So, in this story, Hopper and Joyce had been married a few months before Will met El. And of course they let our Eggo-loving little sweetheart live with them. As for why Will didn't let his friends in on El's existence...

Before everything was finalized, Hopper and Joyce asked both Will and Jonathan to keep the truth under wraps until El was comfortable with going in public. This included the Party (which had yet to include Max) because Joyce knew that all three of those other boys would stampede their way to the house to meet her. And her daughter is not a social person.

She'll meet Mike soon, though... ; ).

So long and thanks for all the fish!



## 2. Jane, Meet the Party

"But there's no rule saying you *have* to bring a date."

Mike rolled his eyes as he approached the junkyard to hear that from Dustin. He was the last to arrive, it seemed—all because his mother was so disapproving of him hanging out in a junkyard. Well, he wasn't the *only* member of the Party running late, but Will hardly ever seemed to show up to hangouts over the past few weeks. He hadn't seen his best friend outside of school since Halloween.

"I'm just saying it's a *big* dance. You bring a date and it's cool; you don't and you're a loser."

"Unless you just go up to girls and ask them to dance."

"Yeah, what girl would dance with us?"

"You are such *nerds*," Max groaned.

"What are you guys talking about this time?" Mike asked, parking his bike.

"The Snow Ball," Lucas told him. "*Dustin* insists that we should all just go by ourselves, but I'm already going with Max."

"I'm not going at all."

"No! Will's already bailed on us so many times—I don't need *you* doing it, too!" Dustin whined.

"What is *up* with him, anyway?" Max inquired, tapping her heel on the oil drum she was sitting on.

"No idea," Mike admitted. "He hasn't been picking up his Super-Comm lately at all. And he's been spending a *lot* of time by himself."

"I say it's a girl."

"Will would tell us if he liked a girl, Max," snorted Dustin.

"Put your money where your mouth is, Henderson. Twenty bucks."

"You're on." They shook on it and Mike rolled his eyes again.

"Will's coming over for D & D on Saturday. He hasn't cancelled, so we'll talk to him then."

"I still say that Will found a girl he likes and doesn't want to introduce her to your brand of weird yet," Max insisted. "And anyway, I'll be home Saturday night. It's 'family night'."

"We'll pray for you," Dustin told her and she tossed a clump of dirt at the curly-haired boy.

By the time Saturday night rolled around, Mike was ready to confront Will about his conspicuous absence from the Party. His oldest friend showed up right on time, ready to play their game.

"So, Will, you've been busy lately," commented Dustin as Mike set up. "Is there a reason why?"

"No, not really."

"Well, you're at *least* going to the Snow Ball, right?"

"Maybe. If Mike goes."

"I *might* go if I can find a date," Mike shot back. "But as it is, my only options are my sisters, so the answer is no."

Will could feel something warm in his belly. Jane had decided fairly recently that she wanted to meet his friends, but he hadn't figured out a good opportunity for it yet. It was part of the reason he'd roped Jonathan into helping teach Jane how to play Dungeons & Dragons—a game that she'd picked up quickly and was actually pretty good.

"I might have another option for you," Will stated with a smile.

"God dammit!" Dustin groaned, face-palming.

"What's wrong?"

"I owe Max twenty bucks, that's what! She *said* you weren't spending time with us because of a girl! Who is she, how do you know her, and how long have you known her?"

"Her name is Jane, she saved my life, and I've known her for a year."

"A *year*?!" Mike repeated, dumbfounded. "You've known her for a *year* and haven't mentioned her *once*?"

"She's not exactly a people person, and I was respecting her privacy."

"We have to meet this girl you're with," Lucas insisted.

"I'm not with her—not like that." He lowered his voice so Mrs. Wheeler couldn't overhear. "Remember when I got lost in the woods? I almost drowned in a pond and she pulled me out. I found out about her home life and after I got home and told my mom... she and Hopper started trying to adopt Jane."

"So Jane's your sister," Dustin sighed in relief. "Is she pretty?"

"Shut up and let's play."

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The following Saturday—November 10, to be precise—found Mike and the rest of the Party making their way to the Hopper-Byers house for dinner and Dungeons & Dragons. They'd start the campaign Mike had planned out early in the afternoon and continue with it after dinner. That would give them enough time to make a call on Jane.

"Okay, so we're clear on the plan, right?" he asked the others at the end of the driveway.

"Figure her out and make a call on whether or not she's cool enough to hang out with us," Dustin replied bluntly. "Or if she's too cool."

"I'm just glad I won't be the only girl in our group anymore," Max snorted.

Lucas was the one who knocked on the door and Joyce opened it with a smile.

"Come on in," she told them, and they entered the house. "Jane and Will are upstairs, but I wanted to talk to you kids beforehand about Jane."

"Will told us she was shy," Lucas replied.

"It's a little more... complicated. Jane didn't have a good home before she came here, and I'm hoping that by making friends, she might open up a bit. Be nice to her, please—other than Will, you're the first kids her own age that's she's meeting. Ever. And she doesn't have a lot of experience with people."

Mike felt his stomach twist as Joyce turned to the stairs.

"Jane! Will! They're here!"

Will came down first, glancing up at the second floor to see if Jane was following. She was, and the second Mike laid eyes on her his stomach twisted for a completely different reason.

She was dressed in what looked like Will's old clothes and a flannel jacket, clearly from Hopper. Her dark brown, curly hair was short and framed her face in a way that was wholly attractive. Not to mention she had big, chocolate-brown eyes with thick eyelashes that fluttered as she blinked nervously.

In short, she was the prettiest girl Mike had ever seen.

"Hi, Jane," Max spoke up, breaking the silence and stepping forward. "I'm Max. It's nice to meet you."

"Nice to meet you, too." Jane's voice was soft and gentle; it suited her *perfectly* and Mike wanted to hear it even more. Vaguely, he could hear Dustin and Lucas introducing themselves and her responses, which were as socially-awkward as Joyce had warned them they might be.

Suddenly, he felt a shove.

"Dude. Say hello," Max groaned.

"Hey, Jane. I'm Mike."

*Great job, genius. You sound like an idiot.*

"Hi, Mike."

"Let's head down," Will suggested. "El and I set up down there already."

"Who's El?" Mike blurted. Jane raised her hand shyly before heading to the basement.

"Her dad—before us, that is—called her Eleven," explained Will as he walked with the Party. "I have no idea why he did that, but I started calling her El instead before we found out her name was Jane."

"That's... kind of sweet," Max stated with a smile. "Your sister's too sweet to be hanging around you dweebs."

"I take offense to that!" They headed downstairs, where Jane was sitting on a beanbag in the corner. Will took the seat directly to her left, and everyone else sat around the table. Somehow, Mike ended up on her right.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi." Her voice was so soft and gentle...

*Snap out of it, Wheeler!*

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"Dinnertime!"

The Party (and Jane, who was basically accepted now) headed upstairs, where Joyce had already set out the boxes of pizza. Hopper was leaning against the wall, watching the kids while eating a slice. Jane gave him a smile and Mike felt his heart doing backflips.

"All your prep with Ellie paying off?" Hopper asked Will, who nodded.

"I'm keeping up," Jane added. "It's fun when there's more than three people."

"And it's better than hearing Jonathan complain that both of his younger siblings are huge nerds." Hopper ruffled her hair affectionately and she swatted at his hand. "Well, I've gotta go. They called me about a disturbance. See you later."

He put on his hat and headed out, leaving Joyce to keep an eye on the kids with Jonathan. Mike just ate his pizza quietly while his friends all started talking to Jane. His stomach was too twisted in knots to try and form a coherent sentence around her. Once dinner was done, they all headed back down to the basement to finish the campaign. Jane ended up going to bed when they were done, leaving the Party able to talk alone.

"I say that we let her in," Dustin declared. "She's awesome."

"Jeez, it took you less than *ten hours* to let her in," Max laughed. "With me, it took ten days."

"Yeah, because Mike was being a dickhead."

"I'm with Dustin on this," Lucas spoke up. They all knew Will and Max's votes.

Now it was Mike's turn. He swallowed.

"Yeah. She's cool. Let her in the party."

"Okay, ask her." He whipped his head to stare at Max.

"Ask her what?"

"To the Snow Ball? You've been staring at her all night!"

"I have *not*!" Mike's cheeks turned pink and his three male friends started smirking. "She's... she's really pretty, that's all."

"Uh-huh." Max snickered. "Wheeler, just ask the poor girl."

"She's not ready for something like a dance if she's barely comfortable around five other people."

"So that's why we all go together and be her bubble," Dustin mused.

"What are you even *saying*?" Lucas groaned.

"We form a protective bubble around her at the dance and take turns making her comfortable around a larger group of people."

"Okay, see, that makes more sense than making Mike ask a girl he just realized he wants to marry—"

Mike chucked a pillow at his friend, who deflected it while cackling madly.

Upstairs, on the other hand, Jane was lying in her bed and staring at the ceiling. Will's friends were so *nice*. Dustin was funny, Lucas was the straight man (whatever that meant), and Max liked to tease people. And Mike... well, he was pretty, for lack of a better word. He'd been quiet when they'd eaten dinner, and when he'd introduced himself, but when they were playing the game, he became a strong, confident person who told a story and made it seem *real* in a way that Will and Jonathan never did.

It was more than that, though. She liked the way he smiled, and his freckles, too. But she chalked it up to not knowing anybody else with freckles. She made a mental note to ask Joyce about it later, but for now, she curled up under her sheets and thought about how soft Mike's hair looked.

Ever since she'd been taken away from Papa, she'd started looking at hair a lot. Her own hair had started to grow in within the first month, and by the time the adoption had been finalized, she had curls that reached to her neck. She liked having hair; it made her head feel warm and safe like the rest of her. Papa had hated her hair and made her shave it off.

But he couldn't hurt her anymore.

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**So Mike and El have met, and they have slight feelings for each other. Okay, so not 'slight' in Mike's case, but it's there. And he's being a chicken and not asking her to the Snow Ball for valid reasons. But, being a Mileven shipper means that IT MUST HAPPEN.**

**So long and thanks for all the fish!**



### 3. Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving arrived and Mike was nervous—nervous not because his annoying-and-distant relatives were coming for the holiday, but because he, his sisters, and his parents had been invited to the Hopper-Byers for dinner. Of course Karen Wheeler had accepted. Especially once she was told about Jane. She'd insisted that they go and meet her out of kindness.

*She deserves every bit of it*, Karen had said when she'd announced the decision at dinner the week before. Nancy was excited to meet the girl who Jonathan claimed 'had a complete and total hold over Mike'. Ted didn't care because he was spending Thanksgiving with his coworkers instead. Holly was too young to understand.

But Mike did. His knee bounced with anticipation as they drove towards the house. This would be an *entire day* spent with the entire family, not just ten hours with Will, Joyce, and Jane. He was *sure* Jonathan had mentioned how he'd acted around Jane to Hopper, and he was also sure that Hopper was a shotgun-dad when it came to his daughter. After all, from what little Mike knew of Jane's upbringing before her current situation she'd been abused. *Abused*. He didn't blame Hopper for being overprotective. Jane deserved it.

*Just like your kindness.*

"Okay," Karen sighed, parking the car. "Michael, you've met Jane. Any tips on how to act around her?"

"She's really quiet and shy, so maybe don't bother her with a ton of questions." Mike was shocked that the words flowed so easily.

"Right. Poor girl." Karen's face was one of sympathy as she unbuckled her seatbelt. Mike got out with Nancy, Holly being released from her seat by her older sister. "Michael, give me a hand with the pies."

He ended up carrying a pumpkin pie to the door while his mother knocked on the wood. Joyce opened the door (Mike had a flash of *déjà vu*) and welcomed them in warmly. Mike headed to the kitchen and put the pie on the counter before rejoining his family in the

living room. Jonathan was already talking to Nancy while Will looked annoyed. Based on the cards in his hand, they'd been in the middle of a game of poker.

"Hi, Mike."

Her voice made him turn around. She was wearing a dark blue dress and a pink headband kept her dark curls out of her face. There was sparse makeup around her eyes. He took a shuddering breath and smiled at her to make it less awkward.

"Hey, Jane. You look nice."

"You, too." Karen glanced over and her eyes lit up.

"Oh my goodness." She walked to where they were and smiled warmly. "You must be Jane. I'm Mike's mom, Mrs. Wheeler, but you can call me Karen."

"It's nice to meet you, K-Karen," Jane replied softly. Nancy shot a smirk at Mike that said *you are screwed, little brother*.

Mike did end up getting roped into Jonathan and Will's poker game along with Nancy and Jane out on the porch. Holly 'helped' Joyce and Karen make Thanksgiving dinner in the kitchen. Hopper turned on the TV to watch a football game while also keeping an eye outside for any funny business.

"So, Jane, when are you starting school?" Nancy inquired, dealing out some cards.

"Mom and Dad said after Christmas Break," Jane said. "I'm scared about it."

"You'll do great," Jonathan reassured her with a kind smile. "You'll have Will to help you out."

"And Mike," interjected Nancy, roping her brother into the deal.

"They won't think I'm... weird?"

"If anybody calls you weird, tell me and I'll track them down and kick

their ass into the Vale of Shadows." Jane couldn't help but smile at that.

"I thought her first public outing could be the Snow Ball," Will informed Nancy. Jane nodded, an excited look on her face.

"Dances always look fun on TV and I want to see the real thing!"

*She is so fucking adorable.*

Mike swallowed back the thought and noticed Nancy had her eyes narrowed.

"You *better* make this girl happy and take her to the dance," she told him in a threatening tone. Jonathan and Will started snickering and Jane was giggling.

"Wait, why *me*?"

"Let's see..." Will ticked off the reasons on his fingers. "Lucas and Max are going together, she's my sister and it would be weird, Dustin has no interest in taking a date, and she doesn't know anybody else at our school. That leaves *you*."

*Shit.*

"I win," declared Jane, putting down her cards. Jonathan tossed his onto the porch and Nancy snickered as much as Jonathan had earlier. Will shrugged and picked up the cards to shuffle them again.

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After dinner, Jane and Jonathan got roped into playing Candyland with Holly—a game that Jane had never played before and Holly demanded she learn. That left Will alone with Nancy and Mike. Karen was talking animatedly with Joyce and Hopper.

"So are you going to ask or are you too chickenshit?" Nancy asked her brother.

"I... maybe. I mean... I don't want things to be awkward and I'm a *pro* at making things awkward."

"She's awkward, too," Will pointed out gently. "But it's actually kind of amazing to watch. Like I remember when her hair started growing out and she got really excited about learning how to braid her hair and stuff like that."

"Growing out? Did she have cancer?" Nancy's face was full of worry.

"No. Her... her dad didn't like her having long hair, so rather than just taking her to get it cut, he shaved her head every couple months."

"Where is he?" Nancy stood up.

"Why?"

"Because I'm going to break his nose. And the rest of his face."

"He's in jail for what he did to El. And Terry."

"Who's Terry?" Mike turned to stare at his friend in confusion.

"El's mom. He messed her up really bad when El was little, which is why he got away with so much shit for so long." Will's face fell, but then brightened. "You know, Mom said we might get a dog soon, to help El with her anxiety."

"I hope she gets that dog," Nancy sighed. "Now, about the prison that jackass is locked up in..."

Mike lost interest and wandered inside, where he saw Jonathan and Jane finishing up Candyland with Holly. In fact, Holly was now sitting in Jane's lap and Jane looked happy to let her.

"Hey," he greeted the pretty girl.

"Hi," she replied. Holly looked up at Mike with a triumphant grin.

"Janey's really nice!" she reported.

"Yeah, she is."

"I win, anyway!"

"Ah! Foiled again..." Jonathan joked, and Holly ran off to find her mother. Jonathan started packing up the game and Mike took a deep breath.

"JanedoyouwannagototheSnowBallwithme?" he said, all in one go. She blinked.

"Yeah, slower, please. Jane's not used to fast-talkers." Jane stuck out her tongue at her older brother and he shrugged.

"Jane... do you... want to go to the Snow Ball with me?" Mike repeated, slower so she could understand.

"Yes." She smiled again and nodded.

"Great."

"Isn't that *sweet*?" Mike heard his mother coo from the doorway. Holly was on her hip, smiling just as broadly.

"Mom!"

"Oh, you just look so *cute* together..." She gasped. "Pictures. We're going to need pictures that night."

"Did he ask her?" Nancy called, walking into the house with Will in tow.

"He asked her," Jonathan confirmed, sticking the game back on the shelf.

Jane seemed to shrink back from the attention and Mike regretted not waiting until the end of the night. Or when they were alone, so that Jane wouldn't have to deal with his mother who felt a need to document *everything* in her children's lives. He did *not* want to put her in that position—not when she was still new to dealing with people.

"Can we leave this alone for now?" Mike begged. Nancy glanced at Jane and then nodded.

"We'll talk about it at home."

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True to her word, Nancy brought it up almost as soon as they got to the house.

"So, you and Jane, huh?"

"Shut up. It's not like that."

"I heard you talking to Lucas a couple weeks ago, saying there was a *really pretty girl* that you *really liked* who *never* like you back in a million years because she was too sweet and shy..."

"It wasn't Jane."

"The way you were looking at her tonight? Bullshit. You like her, and I'm going to make sure her first dance is perfect for both of you."

"*Please* don't make a big deal."

"Mike. It's your first crush and I'm your older sister. I'm obligated to make as big a deal I want out of this. Hell, I might even lend her an old dress or something..."

Mike groaned and went to his room.

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## AND MAY THE FLUFF COMMENCE!

Seriously, though, a lot of people characterize Karen as being an inattentive bitch, and I don't think that's okay. She's a little scatterbrained, sure, but she's also trying hard to connect with her kids who are fighting forces from a dark dimension and hiding lab escapees in the basement. I just don't like Ted Wheeler, hence why he's absent from the chapter.

Also, badass Nancy just because.

REASONS.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

## 4. The Snow Ball

"I promise you'll be fine, honey."

Jane swallowed and nodded, letting Joyce style her hair.

It was the night of the Snow Ball, and Jane's first outing in public. She'd left the house before, sure, but only to go into the woods to have campfires with her family that would end with Jonathan taking candid shots of everybody, or to watch the fireflies with Will on the back porch. She'd never gone anywhere like a school—much less with a boy she thought she *might* be in love with. Of course she was excited to go, but that didn't mean her stomach wasn't also tangled in knots.

"Besides, Jonathan is going to take you and Will to the dance. He promised he'd take pictures and help keep an eye on you. If things start to go south, find him and tell him you want to go home." Jane felt everlastingly grateful to Joyce for being the mother she'd never had as a child.

"I will. Thanks... Mom."

"Okay, done."

Jane's short curls had been combed and put into a sweet-yet-simple style that made her smile. Not to mention she had a little pink eyeshadow, some light mascara, and just a hint of lip-gloss. Joyce had stated that Jane didn't need a lot of makeup to begin with, which made the youngest Hopper-Byers (Will was older by a *month*) extremely happy.

"Do I look normal?"

"You look better than normal."

She took in a deep breath and let it out again.

*Normal is overrated.*

"Is she ready?" Jonathan called, rapping on the bathroom door.

"Almost!" Joyce replied, handing Jane her dress. "I'll see you downstairs, sweetheart."

A few minutes later, Jane came downstairs in the dress Joyce had bought her in town a couple days earlier—blue with tiny pink dots and a pink belt across her waist. Joyce looked ready to cry and Hopper narrowed his eyes.

"Wheeler better keep his damn hands to himself," he commented, earning himself a swat on the arm from his wife.

"Hop, it's a *middle school dance*. And Mike would *never* do something like that."

"He's a thirteen-year-old boy. You know how they think—"

"...and on that note, we're leaving," Jonathan interrupted. "Don't wanna be late for the dance."

"Have a good time and watch out for your sister!" Joyce called as her sons and daughter walked out the door. Jane could feel herself trembling as she followed Jonathan and Will to the car.

*I hope tonight goes okay...*

---

Mike was *not* having a good night.

First, there was the fact that his mother demanded he dress up completely for the dance—meaning a tie and everything. Then she started talking about how much she wished Jane had come over so that they could take pictures together... while taking Polaroid after Polaroid of her only son. As per usual, his pictures came out shitty and he looked terrible in them.

Oh, and Nancy was working at the dance.

Yay.

He entered the gym and found Lucas and Max immediately. Dustin, Will, and Jane had yet to arrive, so he was stuck with the 'happy couple' for now. Thankfully, Dustin arrived with hair that looked like



a bird had been nesting in it, which transferred the teasing from Max. Mike sat down and waited for Will and El.

It was Jonathan he spotted first coming through the door. He headed straight for the photo station, where a line almost *immediately* began forming. Will was next, and he lingered by the door as his sister made her way through.

Mike couldn't breathe.

She'd already been pretty in flannel and jeans, so seeing her in that dress with so little make-up—especially compared to a lot of the girls in his class—made her drop-dead *gorgeous*.

*Why didn't I let Nancy fix my hair?!*

Will led Jane across the dance floor, where she stayed close to him amid the whispers from curious classmates. Mike stood up and crossed to meet her halfway—like a gentleman.

"You look good," he told her.

"Pretty?" she asked.

"Really pretty."

That smile that made his heart backflip into oblivion made a reappearance, and he held out his hand. She accepted it, making his stomach join his heart. Together, they went over to where the others were already sitting and Max jumped up.

"Well, damn, Wheeler. Never thought you'd *actually* get a girl to agree to this," she stated bluntly. Mike subtly shot her the finger as Lucas and Dustin started laughing.

"Okay, okay!" Dustin coughed, finishing his fit. "The basic plan is this: Jane, you're going to be spending time with us to help you acclimate to this environment. It's up to you who you go to, but considering Mike's your date, I'd start with him."

Jane nodded in agreement.

The music shifted and "Every Breath You Take" started to play. Lucas and Max headed out on the dance floor, a girl Mike didn't recognize coming up to ask Will to dance. Dustin went out to find somebody.

Leaving him alone with Jane.

Somehow, calling her Jane didn't seem... right. Will's nickname for her—El—fit her so much better, but he couldn't just start calling her that. It was a brother-sister thing, and he and Jane weren't brother and sister (thank God because tonight would be awkward as hell). He might ask her when—if—they got to know each other better, but for now, he'd call her Jane.

"Do you... wanna dance?" he asked her. She stared out at the dance floor.

"...I don't know how," she admitted.

"I don't either." He shrugged, amazed that he was able to speak around her now.

He rested his hands on her waist and hers were on his shoulders. They swayed back and forth in time with the music, like both of them had seen on TV and in movies. As they looked into each other's eyes, the rest of the people at the dance faded away and it was just the two of them. Just Mike Wheeler and Jane Hopper-Byers.

And then the song ended and the spell broke.

---

"Hey. Haven't see *you* before."

Jane looked up at the unfamiliar voice. It was a boy with dark brown hair and a look of superiority about him... the kind that meant he was trouble. He was smirking at her and she felt a shiver down her spine. Will had been dragged off by his dance partner because he was too nice to say no, and Dustin was talking to Mr. Clarke. As for Max and Lucas, they had gone off somewhere and she wasn't sure where. Mike had gone to get her some punch just a couple moments earlier.

"What's your name?"

"...Jane."

"Well, *Jane*, I was wondering if you'd like to dance with me."

"I'm waiting for someone."

"Got a date, huh? Come on. You can hold it over these other girls that you got to dance with me."

"I don't even know your name."

"Troy."

Immediately, she stiffened.

She'd heard his name before. When Will had come home with a black eye, or Mike came to the house for D & D with a scraped-up chin, they attributed those injuries to Troy. He tormented her friends and brother because they were nerds. And she didn't get *why*.

She was *not* going to dance with Troy.

"I'm not interested, but thank you for the offer."

"Damn, you're just a tease, you know that?"

"Please leave me alone." Her eyes darted towards Jonathan, who was in the middle of photographing a group of popular girls.

*If things start to go south, find him and tell him you want to go home.*

"Troy, back off," Mike snarled, coming up with a cup of punch.

"Why should I, Frog-face?" Troy sneered. "It's not like a guy like *you* could have a shot with a girl like *her*!"

"Mike's my date," Jane spoke up. Troy whirled around to face her.

"You and fucking *Wheeler*?! The *king* of nerds?!"

"He asked me and I said yes." She gave Troy a glare that Mike hadn't known she was capable of and the bully stalked off—probably to harass some other girl.

"Sorry about Troy," Mike sighed, handing her the punch.

"He's a mouth-breather," Jane replied softly.

"Yeah, he is." They watched Mike's classmates for a few moments.

"I think I'm ready to go home." He nodded in understanding. It was a *lot* for somebody's first time out.

"I think I'm done for the night, too."

He walked her over to Jonathan to tell the older boy (and possibly his sister's boyfriend) as much and Jonathan smirked.

"All right, Ellie. I'll take you home, but first: Mrs. Wheeler made me promise to take a picture of the two of you together."

Mike inwardly groaned. *Why* did he have the *one mother* in his group of friends that felt a need to document *everything* in his life? But he still let Jane pull him towards the backdrop and they stood there awkwardly.

"Okay, nope, not letting this happen." Nancy stood behind Jonathan in her red plaid dress. The next thing Mike knew, his older sister was posing him and Jane appropriately for the picture and backing away so said picture could be taken.

He ended up catching a ride home with Jonathan, which was just fine with him. Anything to avoid questioning from his mother about how his night had gone or how good a dancer Jane was or something like that. Of course he'd get it the next day, but it was worth it tonight because he'd get to spend a few minutes *basically alone* with Jane.

When they reached his house, he unbuckled his seatbelt and moved to get out when he felt something soft on his cheek. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Jane pulling away with a smile and he realized what had just happened.

*Jane Hopper-Byers had just kissed him on the cheek.*

"Night, Mike," she told him in that soft voice he loved.

"N-night, Jane." Mike headed to his house and disappeared inside.

"Good going, Ellie—you broke him," Jonathan teased.

"I did *not*." Jane could feel her cheeks burning. Then she realized Mike had tripped up the three steps that went to his own damn house and couldn't silence a giggle. He scrambled to his feet and waved goodbye.

"We have to go back and grab Will from the school. Think you can handle the front seat?"

"I can handle it." She climbed up front and buckled in, smiling when she thought of Mike.

Will noticed that smile when he got into the car.

"What, did Mike kiss you?" he asked his sister.

"No. She kissed him on the cheek and he tripped up the stairs on his way into his house," Jonathan answered for her with a smirk. Will burst out laughing; he'd *never* known Mike to be that damn clumsy in the eight years they'd known each other.

"It's *not* funny!" Jane insisted, crossing her arms.

"Leave it to my little sister to make my best friend into a total klutz!"

Jane made a face and slumped down in the seat and both her brothers felt bad about making fun of her.

"El, if you like Mike, it's not a problem. I'd rather you date my best friend than some asshole who's going to take advantage of you."

"Really?"

"Really. Besides, we're all going to look after you once school starts. It's our job."

"Thank you, Will."

---

**Mileven has begun.**

**Next time, I'll implement something from a story I abandoned.**

**So long and thanks for all the fish!**

## 5. New Teacher

There were still four days of school left after the Snow Ball.

Mike sighed as he tapped his pen against his notebook. Mr. Clarke was just arriving, and he had an excited look on his face as he set down some books. Despite his love of Mr. Clarke's class and science in general, Mike couldn't find it in himself to concentrate. He'd be going to the Hopper-Byers house after school to spend time with his friends.

The fact that Will's house had taken the place of Mike's as their de-facto hangout spot mostly had to do with Jane. None of them wanted to force her to go anywhere, so they just decided to go to her. Not to mention Mike still had the memory of her lips pressed against his cheek after the Snow Ball. He was starting to realize that maybe, just *maybe*, he was completely and totally in love with his best friend's sister.

Once class was over, they headed to lunch.

"So, Mike..." Will said, smiling. "Did you *like* El kissing you on the cheek?"

"She *told* you?!" Mike groaned.

"No, Jonathan did. And he also told me you tripped up the stairs on your way into the house."

"Mike's in love with Jane!" sang Dustin, earning himself a punch in the arm from the former.

"Shut up! She... caught me off-guard."

"I refuse to believe that," Max stated bluntly. "You are *obviously* in love with her and it's so adorable that it's sickening."

"I bet he would love her even if her head was shaved and she were on the run from a government lab or something!" Dustin added.

"Well, I've seen her with a shaved head..." Will admitted. "When her

hair started growing back, she was so excited and she kept asking me to help her put clips and stuff in it if Mom wasn't around."

Mike swallowed at the thought of Jane going up to Will and begging him to help with her hair. The excited look on her face made him smile a bit and he took a bite of his sandwich before glancing up to see a teacher he didn't recognize enter the cafeteria.

He was a tall, thin man with white hair wearing a suit. His face was gaunt in a way that made Mike feel a bit uncomfortable as the man talked to one of the cafeteria ladies.

"Who's the new teacher?" he asked his friends.

"History. He's replacing Miss Applegate," Lucas informed him. "Don't know his name, though."

Will turned around and got a look at the teacher. His heart stopped for a moment as a sense of dread and panic flowed through his body. He knew who it was, and if he was actually there... then Jane was in massive trouble.

"I-I've gotta go," he stammered, packing up quickly.

"Where are you going?" Lucas asked.

"Home. I don't feel good. See you guys another time."

"But aren't we supposed to be going to your house?" Mike protested.

"Today's bad! Bye!"

Will ran out of the cafeteria, his heart pounding as he ran out of the building for the bike rack. Almost as quickly, he started pedaling for home. His mom was there, he knew, and Hopper would be on call. If anything happened, they could call him.

The house came into view and Will threw down his bike before running inside. Joyce and Jane were working at the table on some math problems and both looked up in confusion at seeing him home.

"Will, you're supposed to be at school," Joyce stated bluntly.



"I-I know, but something happened."

"What?"

"*He's* back."

Jane started taking short, shallow breaths in fear and Joyce narrowed her eyes.

"Where did you see him?"

"At school. He's our new history teacher or something."

"No. No, that can't be right. Even if he's out of jail for some bullshit reason, he shouldn't be around children—he's on a list!"

"I don't know why he's out, but I *know* it's him."

"I'm calling Hopper and the school. You take Jane up to her room and keep her safe."

Jane wordlessly followed Will up the stairs and laid down on her bed. Tears were streaming down her face as he shut the door behind him.

"He's not going to get you, Jane. I promise."

---

"Will, who's at the door?"

"It's some guy here for El." Will looked at the tall, thin, white-haired man before him—the same man who claimed to be El's father. A father who'd abused her until very recently.

"You're Eleven's father?" Joyce asked, looking at him.

"Yes, and I don't know *what* she's told you, but she has a habit of lying."

"Bullshit!" Jonathan snapped, appearing around the corner. "How can someone who barely *speaks* lie?"

"I just want to bring her home. Could you tell her to come here?"

"She's not going anywhere with you!"

"Jonathan, go get Eleven."

"But *Mom*—"

"Go get her."

Her eldest went upstairs, kicking over a table as he went, and Joyce faced the man again. This time, her face was contorted with rage.

"I don't know *who* you think you are, asshole, but you are *never* going to have Eleven again."

Eleven clung to Jonathan as he brought her down the stairs.

"Get a good look at her, because you're never going to see her *again*."

"And how are *you* going to make sure of that?"

"My husband is the Hawkins Chief of Police. And I'm pressing charges against you for child abuse and neglect." Jonathan, Will, and Eleven looked at each other in shock.

"You have no idea who I am, ma'am. I promise you that you and your family will not win this fight. Now, come along, Eleven."

She shook her head and buried her face in Jonathan's jacket.

"Come *now*, Eleven."

"I want to stay," she whimpered.

"Fine. I'll have the authorities bring you home."

He left and Joyce went to the phone while her sons formed a protective barrier on either side of Eleven. She dialed the number for the police station and waited for a moment.

"Hi, Flo, it's Joyce. Can you connect me with Hop?"

---

"He's supposed to be *in prison* for *ten years*!"

Jonathan had just gotten home and heard the news. He threw his bag onto the couch and balled his hands into fists.

"And he's not supposed to be around children *at all*," Joyce agreed, nodding. "I don't know how he got out and I don't care. All I care about is keeping him away from Jane."

"Where is she?"

"Upstairs, in her room. Will's with her."

Jonathan ran upstairs and found Jane under her blankets, curled into a ball and hiding from the world. Will was patting her back comfortingly while she sniffed.

"Hey, Ellie," Jonathan told her quietly. "You're safe. He's not going to take you away."

"He'll try, and he'll hurt you all..."

"No, he won't, because Hop's putting him away again. I promise."

*"Will, it's Dustin. Over."*

Will looked over at his Super-Comm. He'd forgotten to turn it off.

*"I know you said today was bad, but we're coming to your place anyway. Over."*

"Dustin, this is a *really* bad time. Over."

*"It was Mike's idea, not mine. Over."*

"Go home. Over."

*"We're literally at the bottom of your driveway. Over."*

Will ran over to the window and looked down to see all four of the remaining members of the Party standing at the end of his driveway. Dustin waved and they made their way towards the house. The smallest boy of the group turned and started to leave the room before looking at Jonathan.

"Keep an eye on El."

"You got it."

Will reached the front door just as one of his friends started knocking on it. It turned out to have been Max.

"Seriously, guys. This is a really bad time to come over."

"What's going on?" Max demanded to know. "You just *ran* out of the lunchroom and didn't tell us anything."

"Because it's really bad."

"Hop's on his way home," Joyce said, walking over. Then she noticed the Party. "Oh, no. Kids, this is *not* a good time."

"Mrs. Hopper, with all due respect, we would like to know what's happening," Mike explained.

"It's a family problem that—"

"Mike's basically your future son-in-law," Lucas pointed out. "Therefore, he's technically part of your family."

"And if a party member requires our assistance, it is our duty to provide that assistance," Dustin finished. Joyce sighed and let them in, leading them to the living room where they sat down.

"This has to do with Jane. Will told you that her birth father... he was a terrible, *terrible* person. He abused Jane in almost every possible way, and he did it for *twelve years* without anybody really doing anything about it. Until she and Will met in the woods and he brought her here."

"How could her mom let her dad do that?!" Mike snapped.

"She didn't have a choice. He... he hurt her to the point where she was catatonic, and she's been that way for almost nine years now. She couldn't save her daughter. And so her father was free to do whatever he wanted. He shaved Jane's head if her hair grew, he pushed her around... almost any form of abuse you can think of, he

did to her."

Max looked sick to her stomach; she knew how that felt, even if Billy never took it that far. And knowing that Jane—somebody so sweet and quiet and shy—had been forced to go through that made her want to take her skateboard and break it across the man's forehead.

"Because Will brought her here, we were able to find out a bit of her story, but not all of it. When her father showed up to bring her home, I told him to take one last look at his daughter because he was *never* going to see her again. And I pressed charges. It took six months in court to get him put in jail and another three for us to adopt Jane. We promised her that she would never have to be near him again."

"Will ran out of the lunchroom because...?"

"He saw Jane's father—Martin Brenner."

Mike stood up quickly, almost knocking over the coffee table in the process. The others looked just as shocked and angry.

"B-but you told us he was in *prison* for what he did!"

"He was. I don't know how he got out, much less got a job at a school—he's on a list that makes it clear he's not supposed to be around children. And now with Jane starting school once winter break is over..."

"We'll make sure she's never alone," Max promised. "He'll be less likely to go for her if one of us is around her at all times."

The three boys nodded in agreement, making that promise.

"Thank you. I just want her to be safe and happy."

"She will be," Mike swore. "I won't let anything happen to her."

---

**Yeah, Brenner getting a job as one of El's teachers was my scrapped-fic idea.**

**Also, two stupid realizations I had.**

First of all, November 7, 1983—that's my mom's birthday. And not just any birthday—her *eleventh* birthday. And the day that Mike and El met for the first time in the woods that rainy night.

Second of all, Winona Ryder—the actress who plays Joyce Byers —played Veronica Sawyer in *Heathers* when she was sixteen in 1989. Going off that, she's actually two years younger than the Party would have been that year. Both her sons are older than her. \*shrugs\*

So long and thanks for all the fish!

## 6. School Sucks

Christmas and New Year's passed with the Party spending as much time as possible at the Hopper house. Yes, just the Hopper house. Will and Jonathan had insisted on changing their own last names to Hopper so that they could have the same name as their mother and Jane's name wouldn't be as divided. Only one person had a problem with it, and that was Max because she couldn't just call Will 'Byers' anymore. She still did, though, out of habit.

But name changes and holidays weren't the biggest concern.

It was Jane's first day of school.

One of the many *other* things the Party had been teaching her since November was how to ride a bike. Unfortunately, she still wasn't steady enough to ride it by herself and ended up sitting on the back of Mike's after he stopped by to meet up with the younger Hopper kids. He *still* wasn't sure how he'd gotten roped into it, but he was willing to go along with the idea for now. They pulled to the bike rack and Jane slid off the seat.

"Thank you, Mike," she told him. Her speech had become much more confident lately, and it was really good to hear her talk without awkward breaths or pauses.

"Hey, Wheeler, stop keeping El all to yourself!"

He whirled around to see Max coming towards them.

"Since when do *you* call her El?"

"Since I decided I was going to, that's when. Anyway, I thought she could ride by herself; why's she riding with you?"

"She's not balanced enough on a bike yet to ride it to school, especially in the winter."

"Right. It's not because you wanted her right behind you—"

"Maxine."

"Don't call me Maxine." She sighed and went over to Jane. "Okay, so here's what you need to know. Avoid Stacey and all her friends except *maybe* Jennifer Hayes because they will try to make your life hell, especially because you're not like them."

"Like them?"

"A trendoid zombie who only dresses in the latest styles. They make my life hell for the same reason."

"And also avoid Troy and any of his friends, right?"

"Nah. They won't mess with you. You're too pretty."

Jane smiled and Mike coughed into his arm.

"Shit, Mike. You sick?" Dustin asked, parking his bike at the rack.

"No, I'm fine, Dustin."

"Great, let's get to class, then."

Jane followed them; thankfully, she was in Mr. Clarke's science class with the rest of the group, meaning they could show her the way. He was glad to have a new student again, especially one that was a sibling of one of his top students. Not to mention that Mike Wheeler seemed to have a certain fondness for her, too—something the teacher had picked up on at the Snow Ball while watching the two dance together.

"All right, class, we have a new student joining us today," he announced. "Please give a warm welcome to our newest addition... Jane Hopper!"

Jane could feel the eyes of her classmates on her. A few boys—not ones she knew—started whispering to each other, along with a couple girls. Mr. Clarke directed her to a seat near the back, right next to Max, and she was grateful to be so close to her female best friend. She took out her notebook and wrote down what she needed to in order to keep up.

Mike, on the other hand, kept glancing back at her while she took



notes. He kept up with his own, sure, but he was worried it was too overwhelming for her. Especially since several of his classmates had seen her with him at the Snow Ball and they were no doubt whispering about how the pretty new girl knew 'King of the Nerds' Mike Wheeler or why she was wasting her time with his group of stupid friends.

Then the bell rang and she headed in a different direction.

---

"Jane, right?"

She whirled around to face a pretty girl with long brown hair.

"Yes?" she questioned.

"I'm Jenny Hayes. It's nice to meet you."

"Thank you. It's nice to meet you, too."

"I'm in your science class... and apparently, we have the same art class, too." Jane nodded. "You're... Will's sister?"

"Will and Jonathan."

"Oh, right. The Byers boys."

"We're just the Hoppers now."

"Aw, that's really nice. Will's always been the sweetest out of all his friends."

"He is. He's the one who convinced Mom and Dad to let me into the family."

"I'm sure your sweet personality had something to do with it, too."

Jane smiled.

"So, where are you sitting at lunch?"

"With the Party." The words were out before she could stop them.

"The Party?"

"Will and his friends." Jane could feel her cheeks burning.

"That... seems like a cool way to refer to your friends, actually. Plus, I *knew* there was something between you and Mike Wheeler. He kept looking at you all through class. *And* I saw you with him at the Snow Ball. It was like you were the only two people in the whole place." Jenny sighed dreamily. "It's the kind of thing most girls *dream* of, you know?"

"Yeah. I do."

The bell rang and Jane packed up her stuff to head to lunch. Joyce had packed her something for her first day of school, and she was excited—not about the food itself, but eating in a cafeteria with her friends. Most of them were already there, save for Mike (who, according to Dustin, had been asked to stay behind by the new Teaching Assistant in their English class).

"I swear she has it in for us," Dustin stated. "She's super-pretty, and she's around the same age as Steve, Nancy, and Jonathan, but *man* is she a bitch."

"She's not a bitch," Lucas retorted. "She's just taking her job seriously. I mean, she's technically not even out of high school yet."

"Miss Morrison?" questioned Will. He'd met the T.A. in his own class earlier, and the woman had been nothing but short and to the point.

"Yeah, her," Max confirmed, nodding. "She's supposed to be doing this unit on different mythologies from around the world, but she spent today just talking about fairy tales."

"Are you guys talking about Mr. Harris's new T.A.?" inquired Mike, finally making an appearance and taking a seat on Jane's left.

"Yep," Dustin replied. "What'd she bust you for?"

"Remember last semester when you guys dared me to turn in one of our campaigns for a creative writing essay?"

"Yeah?"

"Well, not only did I get an A on that essay, but Miss Morrison read it and she said she thinks I have a future as a writer. Though she did say that I need to stop relying so heavily on role-playing games as my jumping-off point."

"Holy shit, dude!" Lucas remarked. "That's... awesome!"

"Isn't it?!"

Jane smiled at how adorably excited Mike was and took a sip from the carton of milk Max had bought her. It was then his eyes turned to her and saw that smile. He gave her one in return.

"How's your day been, Jane?"

"Good. I met a nice girl in my art class. Her name's Jenny."

"Jenny *Hayes*?"

"Yes."

"She got the *least* of the evils," Max proclaimed. "Could've been worse."

The universe then decided to break the happy bubble.

"Well, if it isn't the Nerd Choir and their two groupies," sneered Troy, swaggering up to their table with James behind him.

"The hell do you want, Troy?" groaned Mike.

"We want this table, Frog-face."

"We've sat here since we started middle school!"

"And now me and James want to sit here."

"James and I," Jane corrected without missing a beat. He stared at her.

"What did you say?"

"You said 'me and James' when you should've said 'James and I'."

Dustin and Will burst out laughing at a simple grammatical correction causing Troy to look like somebody had just asked him to explain the launch sequence to a rocket. Even James was snickering in the background and a few other people were turned around to watch. Troy narrowed his eyes at Jane and a snarl formed in his throat.

"You think you're smart, don't you, bitch?"

Jane stared up at Troy unflinchingly.

"If that's the worst you can call me, then you really need to update your insults. I've heard worse."

"*Holy shit!*" Dustin whispered.

"Figured you'd have ditched this loser group by now: Frog-face, Toothless, Midnight, the Fairy, and *Maxine*." Max grabbed her fork and was yanked down by Lucas.

"The only loser is you, mouth-breather. Leave us alone."

Mike felt his heart swelling. Jane was taking a risk in defending the Party against an ever-present tormentor, but she wasn't backing down and he found himself falling even harder for her.

"You're going to regret that, you little fucking *cunt!*"

Then—to the shock of everyone in the cafeteria—Troy reeled back his fist, ready to punch Jane in the face for her comment.

Even more shocking was that someone punched *him* first.

"Don't talk to her that way!" Mike snapped, looking at Troy.

"GO WHEELER!" a guy yelled.

"KICK HIS ASS, TROY!" Stacey screeched from her place with the cheerleaders.

"You're *dead*, Wheeler!" roared Troy. Mike dodged a hit and Jane gasped, jumping out of the way.

"Stop it!" she screamed, terrified. She'd never seen an actual fight before and it was freaking her out. Mike wasn't able to hear her; blood was rushing in his ears and all he could think about was beating Troy's stupid face into the ground.

He connected with his tormentor's nose and there was a sickening *crack*. Troy's nose was now bleeding and most likely broken but neither boy cared about anything but seemingly killing the other.

"OKAY, BREAK IT UP, BOYS!"

Miss Morrison's voice rang out across the cafeteria. The crowd parted like the Red Sea to allow her through and she yanked Troy off Mike—an easy task given their distracted state from her sudden appearance. Taking one look at his face, she motioned to James.

"Take your friend to the nurse's office and have her call his mother."

James nodded and left, and Miss Morrison turned her attention to Mike.

"Michael Wheeler, you're going to have to come with me. And the rest of your group, too."

Jane got a good look at Miss Morrison.

Dustin had been right—she was around the age of a high school senior. She was as pretty as Jane's curly-haired friend had described with long, light brown hair braided over one shoulder and hazel eyes. Freckles dotted the expanse across her nose and gave a 'farm-girl-moved-to-the-city' look to her overall. Even her clothes—a pair of black slacks with a sky-blue blouse—showed an air of innocence and professionalism.

She and the rest of the Party followed the T.A. to the principal's office, where each was grilled about the events that had led to the fight. Parents—specifically Joyce, Karen, and Troy's mother, Patty—were called and none of them were happy. Patty because her son's nose had been broken, and Karen and Joyce because Troy had

instigated the fight with their children.

"He was going to punch Jane!" Mike defended.

"My son would *never* punch a girl unless she provoked him!" Patty snarled. "Obviously, Jane Hopper is a terrible influence—"

"She's never even *been* to school before!" Joyce exploded on the other woman. The principal motioned for Miss Morrison to escort the students out of the room.

"How's your hand?" Jane asked Mike in a quiet voice. He looked up in surprise before glancing at his bruised knuckles.

"Uh, fine. I guess. Did you get hurt at all?"

"No."

They stared at each other awkwardly before Dustin cleared his throat.

"Lovebirds, I hope you realize how much trouble Wheeler is in," Max sighed. "A fight on our first day back—not exactly a good start, is it?"

The door slammed shut and they watched Patty Donovan walk out of the office, stomping hard enough so her heels echoed throughout the hall. Karen didn't look pleased herself when she came out, but that ended when she saw Jane looking over her son's bruised hands.

"Principal Sawyer is sending you home for the rest of today," she told her son. "And you have Saturday detention."

"Where's Mrs. Hopper?" Mike inquired.

"She's talking to Principal Sawyer about something. Some teacher."

Mike's blood ran cold.

He'd met Brenner after lunch the day Will had run out of the cafeteria. The man had the overall presence of somebody who had no problem hurting children... which was why the reality that he'd abused Jane was so heart-wrenching. And even when he'd returned to

school the next day, he'd wanted to punch him in the face and maybe take Nancy up on her offer to pound some nails into a bat and bring it to Brenner's body.

"Can we wait for her?"

"Absolutely not, Michael. I'm taking you home. You're grounded for two weeks."

Mike inwardly groaned.

"Come on."

---

"Mrs. Hopper, please try to calm down—"

"Calm *down*?! When my daughter's birth father is *here*, at a school she attends when he's not supposed to be around children?!"

"I'm simply asking how you know!"

"How do I *know*?! Because *I'm* the one who pressed charges against that son of a bitch to try and get Jane *away* from him!"

Principal Sawyer opened and closed her mouth, her blood running cold.

"Mrs. Hopper, we ran a background check on him before he was hired. There was *nothing* about him being on the Sex Offender Registry or being in prison."

"He has connections—people to make it go away if he wants them to. And I think he wanted to work here to try and get Jane back."

"I can assure you, we won't let that happen." Principal Sawyer had a determined look on her face. "I've dealt with people like him before, and he won't get away with any of this."

"No, he won't."

"Your daughter is in safe hands here. And she's not even in Brenner's class. I'll work on getting the real files so I can legally fire him, and

maybe even get him put back behind bars."

"I appreciate it. And I'm sorry for getting so pissed."

"Your daughter came out of a dangerous and volatile situation. I don't blame you for wanting to protect her."

"Thank you, Veronica."

Joyce left the office and hugged goodbye to her son and daughter before leaving the school.

She didn't realize that the very man she feared was watching.

---

...

**I have no explanation for this. Other than the fact that Principal Veronica Sawyer is a reference to Heathers—Winona Ryder's first major role that she played in 1989.**

**So long and thanks for all the fish!**



## 7. Dates and Secrets

"Being grounded is the *worst!*"

Mike was glad that his two-week grounding was done and over with because he'd been going crazy inside his house. No friends over, no going over to the Hoppers or anybody else's house, and his mother had even taken his Super-Comm so he couldn't talk to them outside of school. The only saving grace of the whole thing was that he could focus on the creative-writing assignment Miss Morrison had given him to test his skill.

"Well, at least you didn't get expelled or suspended," pointed out Will. "Troy got suspended."

"I'm sorry," mumbled Jane, and Mike knew she was blaming herself for him getting in trouble.

"Hey, it's not your fault!" Mike assured her. "It's Troy's fault for picking a fight in the first place."

"Mouth-breather."

"Yeah. Mouth-breather."

"Take it upstairs—don't go contaminating the basement!" Max called.

"Shut up, Max!"

"Make me, Wheeler!"

"I swear, if she wasn't dating Lucas and he wasn't head-over-heels for Jane..." whispered Dustin to Will, who nodded.

"Welcome back to the Wheeler house, kids!" sang Karen, coming down the stairs with a tray of snacks. She caught sight of Jane and her smile widened. "Enjoy yourselves."

"Thanks Mom," Mike told her.

"You're welcome, Mike. Have fun!"

She went back upstairs and Mike turned to his friends.

"So, what are we going to watch?"

"I rented *The Shining*," Max stated, placing the VHS on the coffee table. "It's supposed to be *terrifying*."

"Everyone okay with that?" Everyone nodded and Max put the movie in. Mike found himself put next to Jane on the couch and the film began.

It was pretty scary, especially for a bunch of thirteen-year-olds. But nobody really cared. The Overlook Hotel was in Colorado, after all, and they were hundreds of miles away in Indiana. Mike stopped paying attention when Jane started to cling to him, burying her face in his shoulder when she got too scared. That one action made his heart jump more than any of the ghosts or mentions of murder within the movie itself.

It was official; he was completely and totally in love with Jane Hopper.

---

Hopper let out a sigh as he continued filling out paperwork.

"Chief Hopper?"

He looked up to see a girl who seemed to be in high school—maybe Jonathan's age. She had long, light brown hair and freckles dotted across her nose.

"That's my name. Who might you be?"

"Kat Morrison. I'm a student at Hawkins High and a teacher's assistant at Hawkins Middle. I was hoping to speak to you about something important."

"And what might that be?"

"I... I know about what Brenner did to your daughter, Jane. And I wanted to see him put behind bars, too. He's a horrible man who should never be allowed to see the light of day again."

"What do you have for me, Kat?"

She took a deep breath.

"I have a story. And I know someone else does, too, other than Jane. What we have to say could possibly put Brenner away for good and make sure he never gets out again, even with his connections. It could be the thing that wins over a jury in court."

Hopper leaned over the desk, intrigued.

"I'm listening."

---

"Okay."

Mike took a deep breath as he picked up his Super-Comm. He was going to do it; he was going to ask Jane out on a date. He'd been working up the courage for two weeks now, and he had the perfect movie to take her to see.

"You can do this. You're just asking the girl you're completely and totally in love with to the movies. Just say, 'Jane, do you want to go see a movie?' It's that simple!" A thought occurred to him. "But... what if she says no? What if she only thinks of me as a good friend?"

"What if you keep asking 'what if?' and psych yourself out?"

He whirled around to see Nancy in the doorway of his room.

"Mike, she's crazy about you. She'll say yes."

"You don't know that!"

"I do, actually. Call it girl's intuition, but I'm pretty sure that Jane Hopper has been in love with you since the day you met."

"Nancy!"

"Either you call her or I'm calling... and I'm telling her a dozen stories about you as a little kid, all of which are embarrassing."

"You're *blackmailing* me?!"

"If it gets you to get off your ass and do something about your hopeless pining for Miss Hopper, then yes."

Mike glared and shut his door, turning to channel 11. It was the agreed-upon channel he and Jane talked on, and the radio crackled in his hands.

*You can do this, Wheeler.*

"Jane, do you copy?" There was silence for a moment. "Jane, do you copy? It's Mike, over."

"Yes, I copy," Jane's honey-sweet voice came through. "Over."

"I... um... I was wondering if you wanted to go see a movie with me. Over."

*"Just you and me? Over."*

"Just us. A-a date. Over."

Silence again. Mike's stomach twisted.

"I-if you don't want to, I understand. Over."

*"I want to. Over."*

"R-really? Over."

*"Yes. When do you want to go? Over."*

"I-I was thinking maybe... the sixteenth? Meet me at the Hawk at four on that day. Over."

*"I'll see you then. Over."*

Then she went off and Mike felt a sense of complete and utter joy coursing through him. Jane had said yes. To a date with *him*! The prettiest girl he knew was going to see a movie with him!

"What did she say?" Nancy asked, rapping on the door.

"She said yes!"

"I *told* you!"

Mike rolled his eyes. He was too happy to care.

---

"...and it's after this that we see just how far Psyche is willing to go to prove to her mother-in-law from hell that she cares about her husband."

Jane smiled as she took notes from Miss Morrison's lecture. Unlike most teachers, the high school T.A. was willing to use language that her students understood to get her point across. The one time it had been protested in the month and a half she'd been at the school, she'd fired back that college professors were allowed to swear, and even more than that, the kids swore more during the school day than she did during her lectures.

"Now, who remembers what Psyche's tasks were from Aphrodite? Anybody?"

Stacey raised her hand.

"Stacey?"

"Wasn't one of them, like, gathering some sheep or something?"

"Close. She had to gather the golden wool of the man-eating sun sheep. Which she did by grabbing wool that had gotten stuck on the bushes. Other tasks included water from the river Styx and sorting a pile of grains by type. It's the *last* task that's the most important, though. Anybody know what it was?"

Jane raised her hand slowly and locked eyes with the T.A.

"Jane?"

"She had to take a box to the Underworld and get some of Persephone's beauty to bring back."

"That's right. Now, everyone, keep in mind that Persephone was

Queen of the Underworld and the goddess of spring, so her being pretty wasn't really the point of the whole thing. Also, according to other myths, she has a bit of a vengeful streak. She turned a nymph named Minthe into a mint plant for claiming that she was going to be Queen instead of Persephone."

The class started chattering. Then the bell rang.

"Okay, finish reading the story of Eros and Psyche for Wednesday and I'll see you then. Jane, please stay after class."

Jane swallowed as she approached Miss Morrison.

"Am I in trouble?" she asked in a quiet voice.

"No, sweetie, you're not. I just wanted to talk to you about Brenner."

"Why?"

"Because he's going to go to jail again, but we need you to tell your story. Sit down." Jane obeyed and Miss Morrison took a deep breath. "I really care about you, Jane, more than you'll ever know. And it's because... well, I'm your sister."

---

**HAHAHAHAHAHA**

**I LIKE THE CLIFFHANGERS!**

**But seriously, you all should've guessed this from the moment I brought Kat into the story if you've read my other fic 'One and Twelve'. In that story, she's another of Brenner's little experiments. In this one, she's just El's sister. Like Kali, only... you'll see.**

**So long and thanks for all the fish!**

## 8. Sisters?

" 'Jane Eleanor Ives. Born November 11, 1971 to Theresa Ives and Martin Brenner.' This is the birth certificate."

Hopper took the document from the woman who called herself Becky Ives.

"I was so angry when the state decided Janey should stay with her father," Becky continued. "But... I realized I couldn't take care of both Janey and Terry, so... I let it be. There wasn't any abuse to the kid back then."

"Things change," Hopper sighed.

"If I'm being honest, I'm grateful you and your wife are doing this. Brenner is a monster."

"I have to agree. I met him once and all he did was mention how he hoped his daughter would end up like her mother."

"Bastard."

"Where *did* the name Eleven come from, anyway?"

"Probably the fact she was born on the eleventh day of the eleventh month. But El—the nickname your younger boy gave her? I like that a hell of a lot better than Jane or Eleven."

"Thank you for your help, Becky."

"There's... one more thing. Not many people know, but... up until Jane was about five, there were two other girls in that house. One was from Brenner's first marriage. No idea about the second; some little Indian girl."

"Indian?"

"From India. Both of those girls were gone by the time I went to get Terry."

"God... any idea what happened to them?"

"None. He didn't kill 'em, though, because he's more of a torture type. They probably ran away and left Jane behind as a diversion."

Hopper sighed and ran his hand through his thinning hair.

"If you ever want to see her, feel free to stop by." Becky shook her head.

"State's turning her over to me for the time being, since I'm her closest living relative who's fit for the job. But I let them know that I thought your family was a better option. You got more money, more space, and more love than I could ever give her. I'll be bringing her by a bit over the summer; you said most of your younger boy's friends go to camp, so that might be a good time for him to get used to her."

"I'm excited to make her my daughter. And we'll be teaching her before we let her go to school."

"Good. I'll try to do the same."

---

Hopper stared at the high school girl before him.

"You were from Brenner's first marriage."

"Yes. I was. My mother... she killed herself before he married Terry and had Jane. I remember so much from my time there... but I never said anything because of his connections."

"And he did everything to you that he did to Jane."

"Of course. To him, we were his daughters, but in his eyes, that meant we were his *property*."

"Becky Ives told me, when I got Jane's birth certificate from her, that there was another girl in the house."

"Kali Prasad. Our other sister. Brenner adopted her to be Jane and I's playmate. But... he sold us when we were nine. Jane was five at the



time, and Terry screamed at him not to; it's why he did what he did to her. I was sold to a family here in Hawkins and Kali to a family in Chicago."

"You want me to go to Chicago and get Kali."

"Yes, and I'm going, too. And we're taking Jane with us."

"Absolutely not."

"It's not a question, Chief. It's a statement. Jane and I are going to Chicago to find our sister. You can either come with us or stay in Hawkins. It's up to you."

Hopper shut his eyes. He couldn't *believe* he was taking orders from a T.A. at Hawkins Middle. But... she had a point.

"Why Jane?"

"Because Kali and Jane were close when we lived together. And Kali will only help us if it means helping Jane."

"Not herself?"

"Kali blames herself for not being a better sister to Jane and getting sold because of it. She won't trust you alone because you're law enforcement, and she won't trust me alone because she thinks I abandoned her."

"All right. You got a deal, Kat. We leave on the seventeenth."

"Why not the sixteenth? That's the closest Saturday."

"Jane's got a date with the Wheeler boy."

"One of my most promising writers. He has some serious talent. Although... I *did* notice a hint of romance between the mage and paladin characters in his more recent work..."

"All right. I'll see you on the seventeenth. We leave at seven AM. Don't be late."

"I won't."

"In the meantime... I think you should tell Jane the truth about who you are."

---

Jane blinked in shock at the T.A.

"Y-you're my *sister*?!"

"Well, half-sister. Same father, different mother."

"Papa... was your papa?"

"He was. And you were my precious baby sister who I tried to protect. But he sold me away and I was never able to come back to rescue you."

"You always knew who I was."

"I did. I knew from the second I saw you in the cafeteria that day that you were Baby Janey."

"Why tell me now?"

"Because... because Hopper and I are taking you to Chicago on Sunday to find our other sister. And you're the only person who can get her to talk to us."

Jane felt a little nauseous. She'd gone so long thinking her only blood family was Mama, Papa, and Aunt Becky... and now she had a sister. An older sister who adored her as she was, even back when she'd thought she was worthless. And according to this sister, there was *another* one who loved Jane just as much.

"I know you have a date with Mike. But we're leaving *Sunday*, well after you go out with him."

"I'll go."

"Wait, really?"

"I want to end it. I want to end it all."

"Oh, thank the *Lord!*" Kat breathed a sigh of relief. "For a minute there, I thought I was going to have to beg."

"But... I want Mike and Will to come, too." Kat blinked, then shook her head.

"No. Janey, no. That's a bad idea."

"Will found me. He gave me a home. He deserves to come."

"So why Mike?" Jane stared at her feet and Kat had her answer. "Okay, fine. You're in love with him. I get it. Tall, dark-haired guy who's lanky as hell and plays D&D—okay, actually, I *don't* get it. But whatever."

"You still think bringing him is a bad idea?" Kat thought for a moment.

" 'Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage.' Lao Tzu."

"What does that mean?"

"It means Mike might give you just what you need to bring this whole thing to a close. Something like what you two have... remember that day in the cafeteria, when he punched Troy to defend you?" Jane nodded. "Loving you gave him the courage to do something he'd never been able to do before—stand up to a bully."

"And he got in trouble."

"But he thought you were worth it. So... I'll talk to Hopper about bringing your boys along."

She checked her watch and winced.

"Shit. Speaking of your boys, they're gonna probably start breaking down this door in about two minutes if I don't let you go. I'll see you Wednesday in class, all right?"

"All right." Jane exited the classroom, a feeling of dread and excitement settling in her chest.

"Jane!"

She looked to see Mike running up, panting heavily.

"There you are. What's going on?"

"Miss Morrison wanted to talk to me. That's all."

"And it took ten minutes?"

"It was important. Very important."

*She's dodging the question.*

"What was so important?" They were walking together now, and Mike sneakily slipped his hand into hers. She accepted and noted that his hands were bigger than hers were.

"I'll tell you later... when we're not at school."

*Brenner. What does Miss Morrison know?*

"Okay."

They made it outside, where they were accosted by the rest of the Party. They either asked about Brenner (Dustin), teased about making out (Max and Lucas), or said nothing (Will). Still, the Party made their ways homeward, Mike still letting Jane ride behind him on his bike. It wasn't because of her bike-riding skills anymore, though; now it was just because neither of them wanted to break the habit.

The Party ended up going to the Wheeler house, where Mike brought Jane up to his room so they could talk in private. His mom was out with Holly and Nancy was out with Jonathan, so it was perfect while his other friends set up in the basement.

"What did Miss Morrison talk to you about?"

"Brenner. She's going to help, but..." She looked up at her basically-

boyfriend. "How would you feel about a trip to Chicago?"

---

I apologize for the ending of this chapter. I'm really wrecked right now because I'm pretty sure Steven Universe had its series finale on January 21, 2019 (yesterday, as of writing this). If you don't care about that show, then you won't get it, but trust me when I say I felt drained and confused and upset at the ending and I'm trying to sort through it. But I still gave you guys a chapter with a bit of backstory and Mileven, so there's that.

Oh, and I published a new story called "Mage and Paladin". Check it out; it's an AU involving lots of Mileven.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

## 9. Kali

Chicago, Mike had decided, could suck it.

He'd been there for an hour and he already wanted to go back to Hawkins. Granted, they weren't in the nicest part of town, but he hated the noise and the smell and *everything* about it. Miss Morrison—or Kat, as she'd insisted he call her—was walking ahead like she owned the goddamn place, Will sticking beside her. Hopper was elsewhere in the city, trying to find out some information on a guy named Sam Owens. Mike, on the other hand, was hanging back with Jane. None of the three kids felt safe in what seemed to be the slums of the city.

"Mouth-breather," Jane muttered as a guy started yelling at her from across the street. She clung closer to Mike and Will looked around frantically.

"This was a terrible idea," he muttered. "Why did we have to come?"

"To be Janey's support system," Kat replied. "Besides, it's the only way I could get her to come."

"Kitty, Kitty, Kitty," sneered a voice nearby.

She stopped and glared as a man with his hair in a bleach-blond mohawk came out of an alley. He smirked at her, chewing gum at the same time.

"Well, Kitty, I must say I never expected to see *you* here again—not after that massive blow-up last time. Come all this way to see me?"

"Nah. I had no intention of seeing your ugly ass. I hoped to run into Mick or Fun."

"You know this guy?" whispered Will.

"Axel, where's Kali?" It was as if Will hadn't spoken. Then the guy (Axel, Mike assumed) caught sight of the kids.

"What's going on, Kitty? Who's the brats?"

"This is Mike, Will, and... Jane."

The name 'Jane' seemed to change Axel's demeanor. He blinked and set down the bat he'd been carrying, staring straight at the high schooler.

"You listened to her."

"About what?" Mike asked, speaking for the first time.

"Kali told Kitty to never come back unless she brought Jane with her. Guess it's time."

"Take us to the hideout," Kat groaned. Axel shrugged and grabbed his bat.

"Gotta warn ya—we have a new member now. Dottie. She don't get her name because she's into patterns, either." Kat nodded and followed him.

Having no other choice, the kids did the same.

They went through an alley where several bums were sleeping in tents. A few greeted Axel as they passed, but most ignored or didn't notice the group. An abandoned warehouse loomed at the end and Mike noted the numbers 8, 1, and 11 spray-painted on the side. He had no idea what any of it meant, but it didn't seem good. Axel opened the door and held it for Kat, who rolled her eyes before going inside. Will, Mike, and Jane.

"Well, if it ain't Kitty Kat!" a woman said, strutting up. "Come back to sharpen your claws?"

"Sorry, Mick. Not today. I listened to Kali—remember what she told me about next time I come back?"

Mick's eyes landed on Jane and widened. She then turned to the stairs.

"KALI! YOUR SISTER'S HERE!"

"I told her not to come back!" a voice said at the top. Footsteps came

down—heavy footsteps against the metal. A girl with wild purple hair appeared at the end and narrowed her eyes at Kat.

"Kali," Kat stated.

"Kat." The tension was thick. "What the hell are you doing here? Come crawling back?"

"I did what you said." Jane stepped forward and Mike swallowed nervously. "I brought our little sister."

Kali's eyes landed on Jane and widened. She opened and closed her mouth before rushing forward to hug her. Mike swore he could see tears running down her face and shifted uncomfortably. This was one of Jane's sisters—the only one she had that wasn't related to her. She'd explained back at his house, when she proposed him coming to Chicago with her, what the deal was.

*"They're going to help us put Brenner away. They know more than I do and it can help."*

"Jane," Kali croaked, stepping back. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you."

"How did you get her away from Brenner, Kat?"

"I didn't." Kat gestured to Will. "This guy gave her a hand."

"All I did was bring her home and ask if she could stay with my family," Will explained. "My mom pressed charges against Brenner and my stepdad arrested him."

"What's your name?" Kali's dark eyes were on him now.

"Will. Will Hopper."

"So we have Kat... and Jane and Will Hopper."

"Morrison," Kat corrected. "Kat Morrison."

"You'll always be Kitty with the claws to me," Axel chuckled.



Mike couldn't help but feel out of place. Everyone here was connected—by circumstance, by blood, by family lines that weren't visible. He had no real connections to anybody here. One date with Jane didn't make her his girlfriend. Kat was a teacher who encouraged him as a creator. Will was his best friend, but even then, Jane knew things about Will that Mike didn't. And he didn't know anybody in Kali's gang. His stomach twisted; he was the guy from a small town in the big city with people who seemed to fit in.

"Dottie and Funshine should be back soon," Kali told Kat and Jane, leading them to a spot where an inwardly-charred barrel sat. "Then we'll eat."

"We're not here to visit," Kat sighed. "We're here because we need your help."

"Why? Last time you were here, it was because you needed my help, and we didn't get *close* to where you needed us to go."

"But this time, we're putting Brenner where he belongs—prison for the rest of his life. We need you to come to Hawkins with us to testify against him." Kali sighed and seemed to be considering it.

"Kal, you can't *honestly* be thinking of doing this," said Mick.

"If it means getting revenge on the man who stole my childhood, then yes. I'm considering it."

"He's working at our school now," Mike blurted and Kali seemed to notice him for the first time.

"Who's this?"

"Mike," Jane replied, walking over and slipping her hand into his. He gripped it tightly with a smile. "My boyfriend."

Axel let out a whistle.

"Jesus, Kal! Your baby sis is already a heartbreaker. God knows Kitty's the same way."

Kat put her hands to her mouth as if she was blowing a kiss, then

flipped him off with both hands. Axel snickered and tossed his bat into the corner.

"Let it never be said that Kitty doesn't have claws."

"Kitty's back?" a deep voice said. A man who could only be described as a fucking *mountain* entered the warehouse. Right behind him was a woman with wild blonde hair dyed various colors.

"Funshine," Kat greeted him. He swept her into a hug.

"Where you been?"

"Hawkins."

Kali took a deep breath and nodded.

"I'll go."

"Really?" Axel looked confused.

"If... if we have a *chance* at being normal... of putting Brenner away for the rest of his life... then I'm going to take it. I'll go to Hawkins and testify."

"Great. Now we have to go," Kat sighed. "We've gotta meet Hopper at the car."

"Who's Hopper?"

"Dad," Jane told her older sister.

"We'll miss ya," Mick informed Kali.

"I'll be back. This shouldn't take too long."

"Less than a year, at least," Will added. "Took six months last time, and he still got out."

"Well, let's just make sure he doesn't get out again, then."

---

Hopper took a drag from his cigarette.

*Kat should've been back with the kids and this other girl by now.*

He'd had a feeling, from the time he found out Jane's story, that she hadn't been the first victim of Brenner's abuse. The way he acted and covered up his atrocities was that of a professional, somebody who'd been at it a long time. Kat's story had confirmed that fear, and now a new girl with a similar tale? Oh, Hopper was going to have *fun* putting this perverted bastard away. Not to mention that it would provide closure for everyone involved, including Terry Ives. Becky had started sobbing tears of joy over the phone at the mere *notion* that her sister was going to be avenged.

Then there was Sam Owens. A man who knew a hell of a lot about psychology who had *also* been in contact with Kat. Apparently, she'd met him when her 'parents' (the people Brenner had sold her to) wanted to find out how to 'fix' their new daughter and had sought out Owens as a result. Even after they'd decided that Kat was fine and dandy, she'd kept in touch with the doctor when she needed help or when nightmares about her father became too much for her to bear and she needed to be talked down from doing something drastic and *final* to end it.

Owens had been very helpful once he found out that Hopper knew Kat. In fact, he'd offered to be Jane's therapist to help her cope, should she need it. Hopper had agreed to consider it before walking to the car.

There was a rap at the window and he looked up to see Kat.

"Where the hell have you been?" he asked, unlocking the doors. Mike, Jane, and Will slid into the backseat while Kat and the new girl—Kali—took the front. Hopper started the car.

"My apologies, Mr. Hopper," Kali told him. "I was being a little stubborn."

"Well, it's nice to meet you."

"Thank you for taking care of Jane." Kali had an earnest look that Hopper sighed at.

"I'm her dad. It's what I do."

He pulled out of his parking spot and started down the road back towards Hawkins. In the backseat, he could hear his daughter and the Wheeler kid talking quietly. Mike's hand was on top of Jane's and both were smiling as they talked. Will was drawing something in one of his sketchbooks. Kat told Kali things about Hawkins that the other girl needed to know in order to keep things quiet. Hopper felt a sense of relief, that perhaps once they got back to town and he arrested Brenner, things would go back to normal and they could put all this behind them.

But the week of February 17, 1985 would prove to be one that nobody involved would ever forget.

## 10. First Blood

Their first stop back in town was actually a gas station, because Hopper's car decided it wanted to fucking almost die on them when they were five miles away from the town line. Jane stared out the window while Mike talked with Kat about his newest story that he was working on. Will and Kali were discussing the benefits of their respective art forms. Despite the relative calm that was inside the vehicle, Jane couldn't shake a feeling in her gut—a feeling that something horrible was going to happen. It had been there all day, and the closer she got to home, the more the feeling intensified.

She needed to get to the house.

"Okay, to the Wheelers for the kid..." muttered Hopper, getting back in the car.

"Dad, we need to go home," Jane told him.

"Yeah, let's get *Mike* home first."

"No, *now*. Please."

The tone of her voice let him know she was worried about something.

"All right, kiddo, let's go."

As they turned onto their street, the feeling in Jane's gut turned so much worse and she knew it had something to do with her home. It looked normal enough on the outside, but she was already unbuckled and running for the front door before Hopper had even turned off the engine. She tried the doorknob; it was unlocked. Joyce must've left it for when they got there. Jonathan was home; she knew that much. Everything was fine. She opened the door.

Then she saw the inside of the house.

It was *pure chaos*. Shattered picture frames littered the floor, a table was overturned, and... even part of the bannister had been busted! The living room? A vase of flowers had been thrown at some point and the poor blooms lay there in a puddle. Somebody had been here

and there had been a fight.

"Mom?!" she whispered. "Jonathan?!"

"HOLY SHIT!" yelled Kat, entering the house.

"Joyce!" Hopper called, panic entering his voice. "Jonathan?"

Jane ran into the kitchen and found Jonathan lying on the floor. He was bleeding from a wound in his temple and unconscious. She whimpered and shook him gently.

"Jonathan, wake up," she begged, tears in her eyes. "It's Ellie—please, wake up!"

"Mom's not here, but her car is," Will stated worriedly, coming downstairs. He'd run up there when Jane had gone into the kitchen. Then he saw Jonathan on the floor. "No. Is he—"

"Let me see," Kat interrupted, crouching by Jonathan and pressing two fingers to the side of his neck. "Heart's beating and he's breathing. He's alive, but we need to get him to the hospital as soon as possible."

"Basement's empty," Mike reported. He and Hopper entered the kitchen with Kali right behind.

The gravity of it all crashed down on Jane.

*Mom's gone. Jonathan's hurt.*

*Papa did this.*

*Papa did this to get me back.*

*Papa did this because he wants me to go to him.*

*It's my fault Mom got taken.*

*It's my fault Jonathan's hurt.*

*It's my fault everyone's in danger.*

*My fault.*

*My fault.*

*My fault.*

Jane started sobbing, falling back against the cabinets and burying her face in her knees. The words *my fault* played on loop in her head, taunting her with the fact that she'd hurt people. Not personally, but they'd gotten hurt because of her. Because she wasn't with Papa. Because she'd found a new home. Because Papa wanted her back.

*My fault.*

*My fault.*

*My fault.*

"Jane!"

She could feel Mike's hand on her as she spiraled down, down, down into the deep thoughts of her mind. Everyone who tried to protect her ended up hurt. Terry had been rendered a vegetable. Kat and Kali had been *sold*. Jonathan had been seriously hurt and rendered unconscious. Joyce had been kidnapped. All because of her. Papa wanted her all to himself. Nobody else.

"Jane, look at me." Mike's voice was gentle and pleading. "Please, look at me."

She could hear Hopper, Kat, and Kali talking in hushed tones. They were taking Jonathan to the hospital so he could recover. But that didn't register in her mind.

*My fault.*

"El."

*That* got her attention. She looked up to see Mike looking at her with tears in his eyes that matched hers. He wrapped his arms around her as comfortably as he could and she buried her face in his shirt, still sobbing. Will followed Hopper and the older teens out of the kitchen.

"My fault," she finally said aloud.

"No, this is *not* your fault."

"Papa did this. Papa wants me home. I have to—"

"El, no. You don't have to go back to that bastard. We'll get your mom back; I promise." She hugged him tighter, still sobbing into his shirt.

---

For the first time in his life, Mike wanted to murder someone.

Brenner was the most sadistic, twisted bastard Mike had ever *met*. He'd abused two wives, one of whom was dead and the other catatonic because of him. He'd done the same to the three children who'd lived under his roof... and those were only the ones Mike knew about. Kat. Kali. Jane. All three were strong but damaged, all because of Brenner. That son of a bitch had violated every tenet of parenthood Mike could think of and he'd done things Mike couldn't fathom because they weren't talked about. At least, until he'd heard Joyce talking to Hopper while they were playing D&D at the Hoppers.

*Brenner was registered as a sex offender when he went to prison.*

Mike knew what that meant. It meant that he'd done things *to his daughters* that *nobody* should ever do to children. Things about the three made sense now. Kat's domineering personality. Kali's insistence on controlling her life. Jane's reluctance to touch other people. After he'd heard Joyce say that, he'd looked into what it meant and was *revolted*. No *wonder* Will had freaked out when a guy like that was around people under the age of fourteen. And no *wonder* Joyce was dead-set on him going back to prison.

Fuck that—Mike wanted to see the fucker get shot and hit by a truck.

He'd heard other stories, in his research. About people like Jane, who were kept imprisoned for sick purposes. How sometimes, those people—women—were forced to do things they never would have done in normal life. And how even *after* they were rescued, the haunting memories never left them and manifested in nightmares. All



he wanted to do was make Jane's pain go away so she could be happy, so she could be normal. And it had *worked* when the Hoppers had adopted her and given her a real home. She'd been a person instead of an object for once in her life.

And now it was ruined. Brenner had taken Joyce and hurt Jonathan and Jane was breaking again. Mike was pretty sure he was the only thing holding her together at the moment. She was still in his arms, they were still sitting on the kitchen floor, and it had been a while since Hopper had left to take Jonathan to the hospital. Kat, Will, and Kali had gone with him, so Mike was alone with Jane for the first time *ever* in her own house. She'd stopped crying and was instead clinging to him like a lifeline.

Night had fallen outside. The kitchen was completely dark save for the thin and dim light coming from the street lamp outside. And even that wasn't much, since the house was situated about two blocks away from the closest neighbor. It might've been why there was no report of breaking and entering over Hopper's radio. Idly, Mike thought his mother might worry he wasn't home yet, but he didn't care. Jane was all that mattered right now. Comforting her was the most important thing on his mind.

Jane shifted in his arms.

"You okay?" he whispered.

"I'm tired," she mumbled. He helped her to her feet and she clung to him again once she was standing. They moved to the living room and she laid down on the couch—which had remained untouched during Brenner's invasion earlier.

Almost immediately afterwards, the phone rang. Mike dashed to answer it in hopes that it was Hopper.

"Hopper residence," he stated.

"*Hey, Wheeler,*" Hopper said on the other end. "*How's Jane holding up?*"

"She... she cried for a while, and now she's sleeping. I hate this." Mike's tone darkened. "I want to put a bullet through that bastard's

skull and let him bleed out on the street."

*"My wife was kidnapped by this son of a bitch, and he almost killed Jonathan. Trust me, I know how you feel."*

"Is Jonathan okay?"

*"He'll live. We got him here in time; he was beaten pretty badly. Kat's been pacing up and down the waiting room since we got here because I won't let her take my truck. I already called the station and asked them to send some guys out."*

"Could you call my mom, too? She's going to be pissed when I don't come home..."

*"I called her right before I called you. She's not happy that you're in my house—mostly because Brenner broke in—but she's willing to let you stay."*

"Thank God."

*"Hey, Wheeler?"*

"Yes, sir?"

*"Take care of Jane. Don't let her out of your sight."*

*Or she'll run to Brenner to try and save Joyce.*

"I won't."

*"I'll see you in the morning."*

*Click.*

Mike put the phone back on the hook and returned to the living room. Jane was still lying on the couch, her stare blank and lifeless. He crossed the room and took her hand in his, meeting her gaze.

"Hey. You should sleep."

"Can't. I'm scared."

"Scoot over, then." Confused, she did as he said and he got onto the couch with her, wrapping his arms around her tightly as if he could protect her by doing that alone. She did the same, and she felt safe like she had on the kitchen floor. Or the day that Joyce told Brenner to take one last look at her because he was never going to see her again.

*Mike makes me feel safe.*

"We both need sleep," he told her quietly. "It's been a long, fucked-up day."

"Yeah. Mike?"

"What's wrong?"

"The couch is too small for both of us." He smiled and she did, too; the humor was a dry attempt to cheer both of them up.

"Do you wanna sleep somewhere else?"

"Upstairs." He nodded in understanding and they walked up there together.

Within ten minutes, Jane was curled up and asleep in her bed. Mike laid beside her. She'd insisted that he stay with her, that she didn't want to be alone, and he hadn't argued. But he couldn't sleep. His thoughts swirled with darkness that they'd never had before, of a reality revealed to him because he knew Jane. That same reality was what led him to want to shoot somebody, to murder them in cold blood and watch the life fade from their eyes... and that thought scared him more than Brenner. Bad people had thoughts like that, not people like him. He tried to push it down in his mind, but the thoughts sprang up whenever he thought of the absolute *hell* that Brenner had forced his wives to endure. His own *daughters*.

*Only good thing the bastard ever did was give us Kat and El.*

El.

She wasn't Jane to him anymore. She wasn't Eleven, either. She was El. No other name fit her and no other name felt right to call her.

Maybe, in a different world, he'd been the one to give her the name instead of Will. Maybe in that same world, he and El met much earlier and he fell in love with her even quicker. He knew that no matter where he went in his life, he wanted her by his side. How could he not?

She was El—kind, smart, talented, graceful, strong, and beautiful.

She was a daughter, a friend, a sister, a girlfriend, and a survivor.

And she'd get through this because she was one of the strongest people he knew.

El mumbled something in her sleep and snuggled closer to Mike. He pulled her close and inwardly swore that he'd protect her until the end of his life, even if it meant giving that life up. Their connection was undeniable and *complete*. She was his other half, the Leia to his Han Solo, and he would be damned if he let anything happen to her again.

*I promise.*

## 11. Safe Dreams

The first thing Mike realized was that he wasn't in his room.

He sat up in the unfamiliar bed and looked around. The walls had movie posters for *Star Wars*, *The Breakfast Club*, and a couple of others he didn't know. Glancing to his right, he could see El, still fast asleep.

*I slept in El's bed?*

The events of the night before came rushing back to his mind and he was relieved that she was still there. He'd thought that maybe she would've run off in the middle of the night and tried to go to Brenner. She mumbled in her sleep and curled closer to him.

"El," he whispered. She mumbled something about 'five more minutes' and rolled over. "El, you've got to get up."

Suddenly, there was rapid banging on the door and Mike jumped off the bed. He grabbed the nearest object—a heavy book that El had been reading—and prepared to defend himself and his girlfriend.

"You two had better be decent because I'm expecting you downstairs in two minutes," Kat's voice came through the door. Mike set down the book and shook El again. This time, her caramel-brown eyes fluttered open.

"What's going on?" she mumbled.

"Your sister is demanding we come downstairs. We'd better listen or she's going to drag you down there."

El got out of the bed and followed Mike downstairs, where Kat was pacing in the living room. Her normally neat hair was messy and poking out of its braid, and her clothes were rumpled as if she'd slept in them. She caught sight of her sister and Mike and let out a sigh.

"Hopper sent cops to Brenner's to arrest him last night, but he wasn't there. The place was deserted."

"Papa wouldn't hide there," El murmured. Kat nodded.

"Hop's checking out a couple of other places and trying to follow some leads, but the house he raised me in was empty, too. It's been that way for years now, based on the dust." She started messing with her braid, messing it up even more. "We don't have any other ideas where he might be. There's an APB out and people are supposed to report if they see him anywhere."

"This is so bad," Mike sighed.

"*Bad* doesn't even *begin* to describe it, Michael. Come on; I'm supposed to take you two somewhere in case Brenner comes back for Jane."

Mike and El wordlessly followed the older girl to a sketchy-as-hell looking van, which she unlocked. Once the two younger teens were safely buckled up, Kat backed down the driveway and headed down the road.

"Where are we going?"

"Hop told me about a place he has out in the boonies. I took some supplies there this morning, and right now we have to go get your friends."

"Why?"

"Hopper thinks they might be targeted, too. So I called a conference with all the parents in your group this morning and they're letting me take you all out to that safe spot. Your mother, in particular, wanted you to stay near Jane as much as possible. She told me to keep you safe."

Mike suddenly felt an everlasting sense of gratitude towards his mother.

"What about Will?" whispered El.

"Will is staying in the hospital with Jonathan. Hopper's at the station. Kali's already at the safe house."

They pulled up to the Hendersons first, and Claudia opened the front door. Dustin exited the house, kissing his mother on the cheek and petting his cat one more time before coming down to the van. Mike watched the door open and his curly-haired friend climb in.

"This is a kidnapper van!" Dustin complained to Kat.

"Shut up and buckle up, kiddo. I have two more stops to make before we head out into the unknown and I don't want to be out in the woods in the dark."

"Oh God, you *are* a kidnapper—"

"Dustin, school might not be in session but I can still give you goddamn detention if I want. And yours will be in the form of cleaning out the attic of the safe house if you don't just sit down."

Mike noticed that there was a packed suitcase sitting on the floor. His name was on the tag, written in his mother's neat script, and he knew that she'd packed it for him. Breath shaking, he slipped his hand into El's and she put her head on his shoulder. It felt so *right*. He caught Kat's eye in the rearview mirror and she gave him a knowing smile. The idea that most of his girlfriend's family approved of him being with her was somewhat comforting and made him feel a little bit safer.

Max's house was next, but she didn't come out alone. Her brother was with her, clutching her wrist as he dragged her down to the van. Kat narrowed her eyes and got out while Dustin pressed his face against the window to see the bloodbath that was sure to happen.

"So, you're the girl who's taking my sister to some sort of 'safe location'," Billy said, looking at Kat. His eyes traveled up and down the girl's body and her nostrils flared.

"Yes. We have to get going now." Mike could tell that Kat was trying not to haul off and punch Billy in the face.

"Sorry, but I don't know you and it's my job to keep Maxine out of trouble."

"Billy—" Max spoke up, but he tightened his grip and she yelped.

"The almost-adults are talking, so shut your stupid mouth."

"Let her go, please." Kat's voice had a warning note to it that made Mike glad he was on the other side of the van's door.

"She's my sister."

"And as somebody with a younger sister, I can tell you that what you're doing is something I won't tolerate. Let go of her and let her get in the van, please."

Billy threw Max away from him and she ran for the van's door. He then turned his attention back to Kat.

"Mind if I tag along? Keep you company?"

"I would rather you stay as fucking far away from me and these kids as possible. Come near me and I'll slice your dick off with a rusty machete."

Billy backed away and headed back towards the house. Satisfied, Kat got back in the van and turned to face Max.

"I'm teaching you self-defense when we get to the safe house. That son of a bitch shouldn't be putting his hands on you at any time."

"Thanks, Miss Morrison."

"Hey, if we're outside of school, you call me Kat. That's my name."

"Says the lady who threatened to give me detention *at the safe house!*" Dustin called.

"It goes for all of you, Dustin. Not just you specifically."

Lucas's pickup went significantly smoother and soon they were heading out of town. Kat swung a right on Denfield and parked the car off the road before getting out. The five younger teens followed her example and Mike grabbed both his and El's suitcases. She led them deep into the woods until a cabin came into view. Stretched in front of it was a tripwire, which each of them carefully stepped over before reaching the door.



"Welcome to the safe house," Kat sighed, setting down her own bag. Kali was sitting on the couch.

"It's nice to meet the rest of Jane's friends," Kali stated, standing up.

"Kids, this is Kali, Jane and I's other sister. She'll be staying with us because she's just as much of a target."

"She's cool," whispered Dustin.

"Now, before we get set up, I need to set some ground rules for while we're here," Kat explained. "Rule one: do *not* leave the cabin alone. Rule two: the only contact you are allowed to have with the outside world is through the telegraph. Hopper has one in his office and he's going to be the only one coming and going regularly. Rule three: girls are in the bedroom, boys are out here. I don't want any funny business. Rule four: if you leave the cabin, take your Super-Comms with you. Stay on channel eleven; that's the one we communicate through. And rule five: I am in charge here. No questions asked."

Everyone nodded, agreeing to the rules.

"Good. Let's get this dump cleaned up and habitable."

---

*She was deep in the woods, she knew that much. It was dark and cold and the snow crunched beneath her feet as she walked. Somehow, it was familiar, and she found herself shivering in the cold.*

*"Eleven."*

*Whirling around, she looked for Papa. He was nowhere to be found. Her heart was pounding out of her chest. Now she knew he was truly a monster.*

*"Jane, sweetheart."*

*She looked up to see Joyce walking towards her.*

*"Mom," she choked out.*

*"Jane, you're so strong, you know that? You're the strongest girl I know.*

*You won't let him win."*

*She could feel her mother's hands on her face and then a hug from her.*

*"Mom, he has you. I don't know what to do by myself!"*

*"You have your friends and your sisters to help you. And your brothers will help, too."*

*"My... how do you know my sisters are here?"*

*"Because this is a dream, sweetheart."*

*She felt like sobbing. It wasn't real.*

*"I want you home."*

*"And I want to be there with you."*

*"Has he hurt you?"*

*"Not badly. He drugged me before he took me out of the house, and I don't think it's completely worn off yet." Joyce gripped her daughter's shoulders and looked her in the eyes. "Jane, I want you to make me a promise. Whatever happens, however this ends, you won't stop fighting for who you have the right to be."*

*"I... I promise."*

*They hugged again, and Joyce began to walk away.*

*"Mom? Do you want me to tell Dad, Will, or Jonathan anything?"*

*"Just tell them that I love them, and I'll be home as soon as I can."*

*And just like that, Joyce was gone.*

*She was alone again.*

*"You know where you have to go, Eleven," Brenner's voice said in her ear. "You know where I'm keeping your precious mother. You're just delaying the inevitable."*

*His laughter filled her ears and she covered them to try and block him out.*

*"Papa, stop!" she whimpered.*

*"You're the only one who can stop this, my dear girl!"*

*"No! No! Give Mom back!"*

*His only response was his laughter.*

*"No. Please, stop! Stop it!"*

*"El. El. El!"*

She gasped as she woke up and realized Mike had been shaking her.

Despite Kat's rules, she'd made an exception for Mike because he was the closest thing to family that El had right now. Kali had agreed and everyone had gone to bed. So Mike and El were sleeping side by side in sleeping bags, but now he was just looking at her with worry.

"You were having a nightmare," he whispered, gripping her hand. She hugged him and let tears leak from her eyes. She knew that what Brenner had said in her dream was true—that she knew where Joyce was and that she knew where to go.

*Whatever happens, however this ends, you won't stop fighting for who you have the right to be.*

"Mike..." she whimpered, holding him tightly.

"I'm right here. I'm not going anywhere, I promise."

"Could you help me with something tomorrow?"

"Of course—anything." She took a deep breath.

"I think I know where Mom was taken to. I want you to help me find it."

## 12. Defensive

They left early in the morning, two days after arriving at the cabin. Mike had toasted some extra Eggos and put them in plastic wrap, unnoticed by the older teens or his other friends. El had concentrated on making sure their Super-Comms had fresh batteries and that they had the proper supplies for a trek into the woods in the middle of winter. She'd learned to survive when she'd escaped Papa, well over a year ago.

"Kat's going to be pissed when she realizes we're gone," Mike sighed as he stepped over a tripwire.

"Mom is more important," insisted El. Her eyes were full of determination.

"I agree; I'm just saying that she seems like the type to give us some kind of harsh punishment for sneaking out."

He looked up at his girlfriend, who was smiling gently. Her curls stuck out from under the beanie that Karen had given her for Christmas and her smile made him scramble to stand next to her. Together, they started to head back in the direction of town, in the direction of the Hopper house. Wherever El had lived before, wherever Brenner was keeping the matriarch of the Hopper family... it was near there.

It was the only lead they had.

---

As Mike had predicted, Kat was *furious* when she got up and found them gone.

"They probably snuck off to make out," snorted Dustin when she expressed worry.

"No, not with Brenner out there."

"My guess is she went to look for Joyce and Michael caught her sneaking out," Kali suggested. "Then he went with her to make sure

she didn't do anything too stupid."

"More like they planned it and left early so we couldn't stop them." Kat ran a hand through her hair. "Shit. This is bad. This is really bad. I *just* got our little sister back and then she goes and pulls this kind of fuckery..."

"Why don't we just go after them?" asked Max. "They obviously need backup and it's not like we're doing anything here."

"Okay. I'm contacting the Chief. One of you call Mike and Jane." Kat went over to the telegraph and started tapping out a message while Dustin pulled out his Super-Comm.

"Mike, Jane, this is Dustin. Do you copy?"

Silence.

"Mike, this is Dustin. Do you copy?"

*"Yeah, I copy. Over."*

"Is Jane with you? Over."

*"She is. Over."*

Kat stomped over and Dustin held out his Super-Comm without prompting. He was terrified of her for very valid reasons, but he also held a certain level of respect.

"Michael Wheeler, where the hell are you? Over."

*"Um... near the Hoppers. Over."*

"Hand the damn thing to Jane. Over." There was silence for a moment.

*"It's Jane. Over."*

"Jane Eleanor Hopper, you stay where you are. We're coming to assist your dumb ass because you can't stay put. Over."

*"I know where Mom is and I'm not going to leave her. Over."*

A chill snaked up Kat's spine.

"I'm not going to let you leave her. We're coming to help you. Isn't that one of the rules of your party? If a party member requires assistance, it is our duty to provide that assistance. Over."

*"O...okay. We're in the woods across the street from the house. Over."*

Kat grabbed her bag and dug into a small trunk she'd instructed the kids not to open. From it, she pulled out a small handgun and made sure it wasn't loaded before putting it into her backpack.

"Let's kick it," she told the other six. "Chances are that they'll run into Brenner and it's up to us to cover their asses."

Lucas grabbed his wrist-rocket and the others grabbed what they could to defend themselves before heading out. Kat headed in the direction of her van, still parked where she'd left it that first night. Right behind her were the four other people who resided in the safe house for the time being and they all wanted to stay out of the way of her 'protective rage' (as Dustin had called it when Kat wasn't in earshot). Except for Kali, who'd gotten a gun from the trunk as well for her weapon of choice.

*Badass T.A. and two sisters fucking own abusive biological father.* Dustin could already see the headline in his mind and he felt excited. And terrified. Kat had been giving them all self-defense training as a just-in-case procedure (though he suspected Max might use it on Billy next time he put hands on her) and knowing what she'd been through, knowing that she had taught herself everything, knowing that she hadn't let her father's abuse color her world view... it was amazing and slightly attractive.

Eh. It was just a crush.

---

"What are you two doing out here?"

Mike looked up to see Steve Harrington of all people standing over them. He'd stopped his car by the side of the road and was currently looking from Mike to El and back again.

"You two are supposed to be elsewhere. Safe house or some shit."

"Um..." Mike fidgeted uncomfortably. "El wanted to go for a walk."

"Uh-huh." Steve was not buying this shit.

In truth, Mike had convinced El to wait for their backup despite the fearful he knew he'd get from her sister the minute Kat got there. He'd grabbed a bat that Kat had brought to the cabin their first day for defense, though he doubted that he'd be much use. He wasn't an athlete by any stretch of the imagination and trying to hit another person with a bat usually wasn't in the curriculum for middle school gym class.

Then he heard a car pulling up the road and looked up to see a sketchy-as-hell looking van coming towards them and then slowing down. Kat got out of the driver's seat and she was *fuming*.

"Jane Hopper and Michael Wheeler, you have about *five seconds* to explain to me why the *hell* you chose to leave without telling me first!"

Mike gritted his teeth and stood up, approaching a girl who could *possibly* be his sister-in-law someday to try and explain why he and his girlfriend had snuck out of the house when they were *supposed to be hiding from a pedophilic psychopath*. He clutched the bat in his hands and could feel Kat's hazel gaze on him.

"Well?"

"She said she knew where Mrs. Hopper was. She wanted me to come with her."

"Mike, you're smarter than that. But I *do* appreciate you thinking to bring a weapon to defend yourself." Her eyes flicked to Steve and she gave him a confused look. "Harrington, what are you doing here?"

"I was driving home from a college visit and saw these two by the side of the road. Nancy told me they're supposed to be on lockdown so I stopped to check it out."

"Great. The more the merrier." Kat rolled her eyes and Mike could

sense a slight... tension between her and Steve and he wasn't sure what it meant but he was pretty sure that it was on both ends.

He dealt with questioning from the rest of the Party and Kali while Kat explained to Steve exactly *what* was going on. Naturally, the Babysitter (as Dustin had unceremoniously nicknamed him after an incident involving Mews, Holly, and a feral dog) wanted to protect those kids.

Steve the mom and Kat the dad were going to protect them.

Kat moved her van to the Hoppers' driveway and grabbed her backpack. Steve took the bat from Mike and Max, Dustin, and Lucas set up a communications camp in the van. Their Super-Comms were ready to go and Max gave them a thumbs-up before Steve shut the van door.

"You should stay with your friends," Kat told Mike as she loaded her gun.

"No. El needs me."

"She needs you *alive*, kid—"

"What if you freeze?"

She stared at him in shock and confusion.

"What if you come face to face with Brenner, ready to shoot him for everything he's ever done... and you freeze up? You freeze because he's the reason you even exist and because he's been such a dominant presence in your life. You'll need someone else there."

Kat was shaking. He'd reached a part of her that she'd pushed down a long time ago, a part of her that was still terrified of her father. She could remember the beatings, the silent treatment, the inside of the closet where she'd scream until her voice was gone. She could remember her mother's voice, Terry's singing, the protection both mothers tried to give. She could remember Jane clinging to her like a lifeline, Kali taking a beating in Jane's place, Brenner not giving a damn when any of his daughters collapsed. She could remember him touching her in places no child should be touched, slapping her when



she protested, Jane crying for her. She could remember Terry's screams, her promises to take Kat and Jane and Kali away, Brenner throwing her down the stairs.

Eight goddamn years later she could still see it.

Mike was right—if she faced Brenner, she'd freeze. Jane would freeze. Kali would freeze. All three of them had been colored and disfigured by his treatment in ways nobody could see, and she doubted she'd be able to put a gun to him. Mike didn't have those scars. He hated Brenner as much as she did and *he didn't have those scars that made her freeze*. Mike could end this for good. He would for Jane.

For Joyce.

"Let's hit the road, Wheeler."

### 13. Lao Tzu

Hanging out in Kat Morrison's van had not been Steve's plan.

He'd headed up to a college in Chicago to tour the campus the day before and been on his way home when he spotted Mike Wheeler and Jane Hopper by the side of the road. They were sitting and waiting for something, but Steve knew they weren't supposed to be out. Nancy had told him that Mike, Jane, and their other friends were on lockdown. Not to mention the kid who was basically his younger brother by this point was involved, too. So yeah, he'd stopped to question Mike and Jane and then Kat had showed up.

Steve had never really... talked to her much before outside of class. She was his lab partner for chemistry, but she was out of the class two days a week to do her whole T.A. deal and he found himself taking notes for her on those days. Her grades were still better than his despite her absences and she mostly kept to herself. He'd met her while he was still with Nancy at the beginning of the school year, shortly after she'd moved to Hawkins from Chicago. He'd thought she was pretty and nice, but he had Nancy and Kat was still new.

Then he and Nancy broke up and he broke, too.

It was probably around that point he noticed Kat's hazel eyes on him, full of sympathy and support. She hadn't said a word about it but he fed on that support. Internally, he thought it was some kind of rebound infatuation—some sick way his mind was dealing with losing Nancy. He hadn't said anything to her, either, except during labs when they had to communicate or risk blowing up valuable equipment. Their discussions were limited to chemistry (the lab kind) and when they'd gone back to school, his notes. He'd begun taking copious notes during class to give to her when she was doing her job at the middle school which he'd hand over whenever he could.

Now, in her kidnapper van, he was alone with his thoughts.

Kat Morrison wasn't a normal girl; he'd known that for months now. She was too nice, smart, and pretty to be normal. She was strong as hell, too. Billy Hargrove had pegged her as his when he'd arrived

during the October of that school year and hounded her constantly when she was in the halls of the high school. Steve could still remember that afternoon in December when Billy had gone so far as to grab her ass when she passed him in the parking lot. Her nostrils had flared and she'd body-slammed him into his precious Camaro before going to her van and driving off.

That was the day Steve had realized it wasn't a rebound infatuation. Kat Morrison was the strongest person he knew, and that was strengthened by her story that he'd heard just a few days earlier.

Imprisoned. Abused. Molested. Raped. Sold.

Her entire childhood before the age of ten could be summarized in those five words and it made him sick to his stomach. What made it worse was that she had been her father's *first victim*, soon to be followed by her two sisters. But he could see the defiance in her eyes, and the eyes of Jane, as they prepared to go to war against their former warden. Their abuser. The pedophile who'd made their childhoods pure hell. The man who'd seen Kat as property to be sold off to the highest bidder.

The first time he'd met Jane, though, he'd known that she and Kat were somehow related. Something in the way their faces were shaped, the way that they carried themselves, made it obvious that there was a genetic connection. Them being sisters hadn't been his immediate thought, but he'd probably been the first person to suspect it. He spent a lot of time looking at Kat's face in the lab.

*God*, he wished he was more like Mike Wheeler—loyal to the point where he'd sacrifice himself for the safety of those he cared about, selfless, and unafraid to show affection to the girl he loved more than his own damn life. Steve had never been that guy. He'd been the popular jock who just so happened to have a steady girlfriend. Once the girlfriend was gone, he didn't know what to do. His attention had instead turned to the one girl he still had a decent relationship with—his lab partner. If he'd been that guy—like Mike—he would've followed Kat into the woods to defend her if she needed it.

No, instead, he was in her van with three middle schoolers.

"Steve, do you think they'll get Mrs. Hopper out?"

He was shaken from his thoughts by Dustin's inquiry.

"Of course they will. Kat's tough. I saw her body-slam Billy Hargrove into the side of his Camaro once when he made a pass at her."

"Jackass! Kat is to be respected and feared."

"Gotta agree with you there. She misses two days of school a week and somehow *still* gets better grades than me. And she uses *my* chemistry notes."

"Oh my God—you *like* her!" Max gasped.

"Yeah, I do."

"So why are you sitting here? Go after her!" Lucas urged.

"I have to keep you shitheads safe! I can't go off after a girl into the woods just because I like her."

"Mike did," Dustin reminded him.

"Yeah, I'm not Wheeler, okay? I can't be like him because I'm not him."

"You can try. Go after her and keep her safe. We'll be fine. If something happens, radio us and we'll get the Chief there as soon as possible."

Max held up Kat's keys and Steve frowned. Then he remembered Kat handing something to Max and saying 'if shit goes down drive to town' before heading off after Mike and Jane. Kali was already with them and Steve had felt like she'd been referring to him. You know, the one staying behind who actually had a license.

But now Steve had a different idea... one that might save their asses.

---

Kat marked the trees with a piece of chalk as they walked through the woods. Each one was showing the path that they'd take back,

once they had Joyce and Brenner was either dead or knocked the fuck out and being carried back to the edge of the woods so he could go back to prison.

*Hope he gets shanked.*

She looked ahead and could see that Mike was whispering to Jane, and that her little sister was gripping his hand tightly. Jane's breathing was slightly ragged but steady. Kat recognized it. It was Jane coming to terms with the fact that she was returning to her twelve-year hell where she'd been tortured and put through more than anybody should *ever* have to go to. Kat had done the same thing, shortly after Hopper had investigated the place she'd been raised. Except she got out that turmoil by smashing windows and breaking furniture and the door of *that closet* before curling into a ball and sobbing in the corner.

Now her sister had somebody to lean on. Kat hadn't had that. She'd had her 'adoptive parents' (the highest bidders who'd bought her from Brenner) and Doc Owens, but all of that hadn't made the memories go away. Nobody to comfort her when she felt like shit and she wasn't making a difference in her life because she felt worthless. Kali had her gang, Jane had her adoptive family and the Party, but Kat? Nobody. She'd been alone since the day she'd been separated from her sisters. In Kali's gang, during the brief six-month period she'd ran with them, she'd still felt isolated—even more so when Kali screamed at her to leave and never come back.

In a way, Kat was jealous. But she also understood that she was hard to approach. Years of Mr. and Mrs. Morrison trying to turn her into the perfect daughter and her own memories had closed her off, not wanting to bother anybody with her problems. She'd become a T.A. when she'd heard about the opening because she wanted to show that she cared. Finding her long-lost and now *free* little sister? That had been a bonus. She was proud of herself for keeping up and still being true to who she was. Even if that meant she didn't have friends or meaningful relationships. Her heart had picked Steve as her first real crush and she'd tried her damndest to ignore those feelings. He was the popular guy who didn't need the quiet, friendless weird girl who just so happened to be his lab partner pursuing him.

But he'd *helped her*. With her notes, in chemistry, even with making sure those stupid kids were safe. He *cared*.

She'd forgotten what it was like to have someone care.

And now she was going to end the cycle.

---

El felt Mike squeeze her hand as they approached her childhood home.

Already, they'd passed the dilapidated cabin where she'd sheltered Will for a week, the pond she'd pulled her stepbrother out of, and she knew it was only going to be a few minutes before they reached the house. If she'd been alone, she wouldn't have moved past the pond. Too many dark memories clouded her mind of being in these woods and with Papa. But she had Mike. She had Kali. She had Kat. A weird sort of family that she honestly wasn't sure anybody would ever find normal.

*Normal is overrated.*

Will's words from the past October echoed in her head. Once meant to be words of comfort, they now served as a sort of description for El's life.

*My mother was raped and married by my father while Kat's was still alive.*

*He buried Kat's mother in the woods and marked her grave with a stick.*

*Kat and Kali tried to protect me by taking his abuse in my place.*

*I lost my sisters because my father wanted to make money.*

*I escaped the house because Papa forgot to lock the door.*

*I survived in the woods for a month before pulling a boy who would become my brother out of a pond.*

*I was adopted by a real family and given real friends.*

*I fell completely and totally in love with a boy before I started high school.*

*I was Jane Brenner.*

*I was Eleven Brenner.*

*I am Jane Hopper.*

*I am El.*

*And I am not normal. I don't want to be normal.*

*I am me.*

The house came into view and she could see tire tracks on the ground. Papa wasn't home, but these were relatively fresh. He'd been there recently. She knew. And she also knew he never left the house for long. Usually he'd only be gone an hour at most. They didn't have much time. He'd probably come back while they were trying to find Joyce inside and...

She didn't want to think about that.

But she also didn't want to regret anything.

"That's the house?" Mike whispered to her. She nodded.

"That's the house."

"I'm burning that fucker to the ground," Kali commented, and El wasn't sure if she was talking about the house or Brenner. Maybe both.

Her sisters moved ahead and Mike went to follow, but El held him back a bit.

"Mike... he's coming back soon. And... we'll be in there when he does." He nodded, holding her face in his hands gently. She had her arms around him. "I don't want... I don't want you to get hurt..."

"I've got you to fight for, don't I?"

He was right there. He was so close...

*Screw it.*

El got on her tiptoes and kissed him. He was surprised but quickly kissed her back. They pulled apart and stared at each other, knowing that this was their first kiss and that they were more than likely not going to have another opportunity for a while. And it gave them the resolve to face whatever her Papa threw at them together.

What was it Kat had said the week before?

*"Being deeply loved by someone gives you strength, while loving someone deeply gives you courage."*

Mike gave her strength and courage. It was what she needed more than ever.

They walked down to the house.



## 14. Last Stand

Her first instinct was to go upstairs.

Kat was checking the floorboards for secret panels and Kali was down in the basement, but Mike stayed with El as she headed up to the room she'd resided in for six years.

It was tiny—much smaller than her room at home. This one could hold a small cot and a dresser with a lamp on top of it, but that was it. Her stuffed lion that she'd left behind when she'd escaped was on top of the sheets and she could hear Mike inhale sharply behind her as he got a look at it.

"This is... this is inhumane." She could feel the heat from his rising anger as they went inside and she turned on the lamp.

For six years, her only light source had been that lamp. Her only comfort had been a stuffed animal. And this room had mostly been her world. Papa had only let her out to use the bathroom or to eat. If she was good, he let her wander the house while he was out and about. If she disobeyed him or tried to get out, he'd lock her in an even-smaller closet—a tactic she was *sure* he'd used on Kat and Kali and the reason all three sisters had severe claustrophobia. Wordlessly, she opened her dresser drawer and found her old clothes still folded. Underneath there was a slightly-yellowed paper that made her pause before she pulled it out.

It had obviously been done by a young child—by her, based on the number eleven written in the corner. It was a drawing of five people: herself, Kali, Kat, Terry, and Papa. In the back of her thirteen-year-old mind, she could remember this picture. She'd drawn it as a present for Papa to try and make him happy, to make him stop hitting her mother and sisters. It hadn't worked and—she remembered with a heart-stopping thought—Terry had lost her ability to function less than two weeks later.

Those two words tried to creep into her mind again.

*My fault.*

Then Mike took her hand and pulled her into a hug and she knew that it wasn't. It wasn't her fault that her father was such a terrible person. It wasn't her fault that he'd done so many horrible, ugly, inhuman things. None of it was her fault. None of it was anybody's fault but his. He was the one who'd chosen to beat and abuse two wives and three daughters. He was the one who'd broken into her home and attacked her brother and kidnapped her mother.

And now there was hell to pay.

Together, she and Mike began to descend the staircase before she heard rhythmic tapping. Her hearing was good after years of training herself to listen for Papa's footsteps and she could hear it.

*Tap tap tap tap.*

*Tap.*

*Tap tap, tap tap.*

*Tap tap, tap, tap.*

Morse code.

Afternoons with Hopper and Joyce suddenly came to mind, when they'd taught her to use Morse code. It was Hopper's favorite form of communication.

*H. E. L. P.*

*Help.*

She turned and ran back up the stairs two at a time and Mike was right behind her. There, the closet. Her claustrophobic hell. The tapping came from there.

She fumbled with the knob for a moment before Mike ran back to her room and came back with the lamp. He brought down the metal base on the knob and broke it, allowing them to open the door.

And there was Joyce, bound and gagged but alive. El let out a cry and immediately pulled the gag out of her mother's mouth before

going to work on the ropes. Mike still held the lamp (his weapon of choice now, El guessed) and kept watch. Kali and Kat ran up the stairs and both looked relieved to see Joyce was okay. All four helped Joyce to her feet and Kali and El stood on either side of the mother of three.

"Let's get out of here," whispered El to her mother.

"God, Jane... you found me."

"And I'm keeping my promise."

Joyce smiled knowingly and they began their trek down the stairs. Kat had her gun in her hand and Mike had the lamp—defenders of the innocent, the two of them.

Then the front door slammed shut and suddenly they were face to face with Papa. He looked at his three daughters with a smile that had *never* been good when they lived with him and Kat froze.

"My girls have come home."

---

Hopper sped through the woods, the Blazer bumping along uneven ground as he went. He could see the chalk marks left on the trees as a trail to follow and guessed that Kat had done it to ensure they could find their way back. Right now, though, they were a trail to his wife and daughter and he was grateful that Steve had made the radio call to tell him as much. He was less pleased that the Wheeler kid hadn't stopped his daughter from making the dumb decision to go after a psychopathic pedophile, and that her sisters had failed to stop her, but he was resigned to arresting the guy. Besides, his stepsons were currently safe and under police protection in the hospital, so he could afford to personally go after his wife's kidnapper and his daughter's abuser.

The little house was in front of him and a black car was outside. He could hear sounds of a struggle, of Mike screaming 'let her go, you bastard!' and that made him park the car and run inside. Joyce was trying to stay upright while protecting an injured Kali, Mike was being held up by some thug, and Kat was shaking and trying to pull

the trigger on her father without hitting Jane, who was being *caressed* by the man.

"Let her go!" barked Hopper, pointing his own gun at Brenner.

"Ah, Chief Hopper," Brenner chuckled. "How nice of you to join us."

"Let my daughter and wife go. Let them all go."

"I can't do that. You see, my Eleven is the most precious thing in the world to me, and you took her away."

"*Bullshit!*" Mike roared before Hopper could say anything. "You don't *know* how amazing she is because you only ever saw her as a *toy!*"

Brenner narrowed his eyes at Mike and nodded to the thug holding him. The larger man moved to put Mike into a chokehold and suddenly the boy can't breathe. Kat aimed her gun at the thug and fired, hitting him in the shoulder. The man screamed before dropping Mike, the lanky boy struggling to regain his ability to function. Now Kat's gun is again aimed at Brenner and so is Hopper's.

"You *bitch!*" the thug snarled, lunging for Kat and tackling her. The gun tumbled from her hands and Mike went for it, still coughing and sputtering as he took up Kat's place aiming the weapon at Brenner.

Jane, seemingly having a new sort of resolve, brought down the heel of her boot on Brenner's toe, making her co-creator release her in a moment of pain. She ran for Joyce and Kali immediately and then Brenner pulled out his own gun. It was aimed at Mike and there was so much confusion as Kat broke her attacker's nose with a *pop* and Joyce pulled Jane into an embrace.

Then there was a gunshot.

Then silence.

## 15. Aftermath

Pain.

That was the first thing that registered in Mike's mind as he came to. His right shoulder was full of pain and it hurt so badly and he just wanted to make it stop. Then he remembered what had been happening and his mind went away from the pain and onto El.

*Brenner.*

*Finding Joyce.*

*Almost escaping.*

*Kat fighting a man twice her size.*

*A gunshot.*

He opened his eyes and looked up at the pure white ceiling. He was in the hospital; he knew that much. Glancing at his right shoulder revealed it was heavily bandaged and further down his arm, an IV was stuck into the vein. But all that didn't worry him. He was worried about El. Screw the pain. Screw the bandages and his hurt shoulder. Where was the love of his life? Was she okay? Was Brenner gone?

"El?" he whispered.

No answer.

Maybe this was a dream. Maybe they'd never gone after Brenner at all and he'd just slipped and hurt himself and his mind wanted to come up with a more badass explanation for why his shoulder was injured. Maybe El was safe back at the cabin—maybe even at home—and Joyce hadn't been kidnapped at all.

"Michael!"

His heart dropped as his mother ran into the room, Holly on her hip and red-eyed from crying. Her normally-perfect hair was a mess and implied she hadn't been sleeping for a while.

"Hi, Mom," he croaked, his throat drier than a desert.

"You're awake. Thank God!"

"What happened?"

"You went out to that... that place with Jane and you were *shot*! How do you *not* remember?!"

"It's all a little fuzzy... where's El?"

"El?" Karen looked confused.

"Jane. I call her El now."

"Oh. She's with her family at the moment; Jonathan and Joyce are still recovering from everything that's happened this week. She's barely left your side the past couple days except to check on them."

*Couple days? I've been out for a couple days?!*

"I'll let her know you're awake."

Holly squirmed to be put down and Karen obliged. Soon, Mike's five-year-old sister was seated right next to him, her blonde hair in pigtails secured by bows. They were half-undone now, probably from spending so much time in the hospital, but he was glad to have her there as their mother exited his hospital room. Holly put a hand on Mike's head as if to steady him as his breathing became slightly irregular.

Then El entered the room and she was the only thing that mattered.

"Hi," he told her.

"Hi," she replied. Holly hopped down and pulled El's hand so that the older girl had no choice but to follow before placing it in Mike's. Her eyes gleamed as she looked from her big brother to her future sister.

"Are you okay?" Mike asked as Holly curled up next to him.

"Who cares if I'm okay? You're the one who was shot in the shoulder!"

Her tone is frustrated.

"Yeah, but I'm more worried about you! What happened with Brenner?"

"He's the one who shot you, you know. And right after that Hopper got him back. You and Kali and Mom all needed medical attention; apparently, he didn't feed Mom the entire time he had her."

"El..." He had no idea what to say.

"She's better, though, and she said to tell you that you're a very brave moron for following me to the house." Mike snorted; that was definitely something Joyce would say. "I'm going to let everyone else know you're awake."

"Wait, El, come here." She did and he pulled her closer before planting a kiss on her lips. Holly squealed between them and clapped her hands excitedly. The two teenagers pulled apart and El smiled before leaving the room.

"Mikey loves Janey!" Holly announced.

"Yeah, I do," he replied with a grin.

---

He was released from the hospital a few days later. His shoulder was still bandaged, but the pain was wearing off. The doctors had told him that he'd have a scar and a story to tell if he took it easy. But he was still in eighth grade, and he still had to go to school. Joyce ended up driving him, Will, and El and he took a deep breath in the backseat.

"You can do this," El assured him.

"Thanks."

He got out of the car and she did the same, linking her fingers with his as they approached the bike rack where Dustin, Max, and Lucas were waiting.

"How's the shoulder?" Lucas asked.

"Better. Still hurts a little."

"You got *shot*. I'd be surprised if it *didn't* hurt!"

The Party headed towards the building, talking and laughing and joking as if everything was normal. Mike felt lighter today—maybe it was because he'd never have to look at Brenner's stupid face in History again, or because El was finally completely safe, but he was happy.

Then the whispers started.

Most of the conversation had stopped when the Party started down the hall. Instead, kids were whispering and staring at them, and Mike knew exactly why. Hawkins wasn't a big town, so the news that they'd gone up against a guy like Brenner—and that a fourteen-year-old had been *shot*—had spread like wildfire. Even Troy was looking at him with a degree of awe and respect.

It was awesome until right before lunch, when Mr. Harris let them into groups to study for the test on their mythology unit. Norah Chandler and a couple of Stacey's other cheerleading minions pulled Mike into their group and stared at him as he opened up his notes.

"Can I help you?" he asked.

"What was it like to be face-to-face with somebody like that?" Norah inquired. "Like Brenner?"

"Terrifying. Can we please work on our notes?"

"Sure." Norah was twisting a lock of blonde hair around her finger as she smiled at Mike and it made him slightly uncomfortable. He wished it was Monday or Wednesday, because then Kat would've seen it and switched him to another group so he didn't seem like an asshole. But it was Tuesday. Kat would be back the next day for their test before they moved on to the King Arthur unit on Monday.

"You can eat lunch with us if you want," added Libby Duke, one of the other girls. "You and all your friends. I mean, you, Henderson, and Hopper are pretty cute and you're heroes!"



"Uh, thanks, but no thanks. I'm in a relationship."

"Really?" Norah, Libby, and Eliza stared at him with interest.

*Okay, I'm suggesting that we move our lunch table today.*

---

"Wait, *cheerleaders* wanted to sit with us and *that's* why we moved out to the bleachers?!"

Dustin was horrified at Mike's revelation.

"They didn't *actually* want to sit with us. They wanted to be seen with us," snorted Max, crossing her arms. "If they wanted to sit with us, they would've done it earlier this year. And by the sounds of it, Stacey's minions were flirting with you, Wheeler." El looked up in worry and Mike squeezed her hand reassuringly.

"I wouldn't go after any of them, El. They're too fake for me."

"But *dude*!" Dustin protested before Mike silenced him with a glare.

"I'm going to fail Kat's test tomorrow," groaned Will. "She asks a lot of questions about interpretation and I'm not good at this stuff."

"She told me it's going to be multiple choice because she's too exhausted from last week to read essays or short answers," El told her brother, patting him on the shoulder. "I think you'll be fine."

"Easy for you to say. I don't think Kat's processed that I'm technically her brother, too."

That had never occurred to Mike. The fact that El had other family that legitimately cared about her in the form of Kat and Kali. And maybe even Steve, who seemed to be hanging around the T.A. a *lot* these days. But it was whatever. Brenner was going on trial within a month and their case was too strong to ignore, especially with Kat and Kali testifying alongside El. And he'd be right there in the courtroom, supporting her and being the comfort she needed.

"Hey, Wheeler!"

On instinct, he stiffened at the sound of Troy's voice.

"The hell do you want, Troy?" Mike crossed his arms and winced at the pain in his right shoulder as he glared at his lifelong tormentor.

"Uh... just... you're a little cooler than I thought. All of you. And Brenner's an ass."

"Damn straight," Max stated. Troy walked off and Mike sighed.

Things were never going to go back to normal, were they?

Then he felt El squeeze his hand and he was fine with that.

---

**WHOO OKAY!**

**I'M BACK! IN THE AUTHOR'S NOTES!**

Did you miss me? I missed you guys. The notes went away because I didn't want to detract from the suspense of the chapters. Typically, these are for humor or little announcements concerning my writing.

So yeah. Mike got shot. \*hides behind barrier\* He's okay! He's just going to have a badass scar and a great story to tell his kids when they're teenagers and trying to do stupid shit.

I think there's only one more chapter to go in this story. However, we're not done with this AU yet! I'm planning to post a series of one-shots that will serve as a sort of sequel/side-story to this monster. Trust me, the Steve/Kat thing will make way more sense there.

Speaking of one-shots, I published one titled 'You're In My Head Like a Catchy Song' and you should totally check it out along with my Gravity Falls AU, 'Welcome to Hawkins'.

So long and thanks for all the fish!

## 16. Epilogue: Screw Normal

High school.

Mike had been dreading it for years. High school meant harder classes, more homework, and being sent back to the bottom of the totem pole. Not that he'd gotten very high up on it, but still. What little status he had was going to be reset and he'd be back at the bottom. Back when he'd started middle school, he'd watched Nancy start high school and be crazy popular. However, she also started to cut herself off from him and he didn't know how to interact with her anymore. Whatever comradery they'd had as kids was gone and in its place was constant teasing, fighting, and bickering.

Things were much different from how he'd pictured starting high school, though. For one thing, he had El and never in his *life* had he ever imagined he'd have a girlfriend when he began high school. Not to mention that Steve Harrington and Kat Morrison—Hawkins High's new *it* couple—were seniors and both of them promised to look out for their younger friends. There was also the teeny, tiny, insignificant fact that Mike had been shot by a psychopathic pedophile and that gave him major popularity points with the older students. Most of them also knew that Kat had been involved and broken a guy's nose, which actually helped El a bit.

None of the members of the Party gave a rat's ass about their status. The six of them just wanted to survive high school and make it to college in one piece.

So why did they let Mom Steve and Dad Kat drive them?

"SHIT!" Dustin yelled as Kat slammed on the brakes.

"ASSHOLE!" Kat flipped off Tommy H., who had decided to pull in front of her.

"Babe, calm down," Steve sighed. "He's just a jackass. He's not worth it."

"I almost crashed! His fault, not mine."

"Yes, it was his fault, but you need to calm down. You're stressed out and it's not good for you."

"Mom and Dad are fighting again," commented Will to El.

"They'll work it out later," Max replied. Kat found a parking spot and pulled in, the doors of her van opening to allow the new freshmen out.

"Thanks, Dad," Dustin told her. "Please don't do that again."

"No problem. You know I'm a better driver than that."

"It's better than riding with Billy," Max stated.

"Low bar, Max. Very low bar."

"We'd better get going," Mike spoke up, his hand in El's.

"Have a good day. Remember, I'm driving you home," Steve told the kids. "Kat has a meeting."

Kat tossed the van's keys to Steve and headed off, all of the others heading to their respective classes. Mike was grateful that he shared his first period—which happened to be biology—with El. It meant he could spend more time with her.

She deserved everything good in the world.

And he wanted to give it to her.

---

Two years ago, she'd been living in a literal hell. Beaten, ignored, berated, molested, raped, and locked up. Back then, she'd thought that was all she'd ever know. That was her life. It was normal. Papa was all she needed in the world and anything else was bad. That was what he'd taught her and it was what she believed because there was nothing else. She didn't have anything to hold onto.

Then she took a chance and ran into the woods.

For two weeks, she lived out there, hiding from Papa and teaching

herself to survive. It was necessary for her to live, and she wanted to live so she could get away from him permanently. Then she'd heard a splash and somebody screaming for help in the pond one night in November, and she dove in to save them. That boy she saved became her family, her first friend, her brother. But he saved her more than she saved him; it was because of him that she had a family that loved her and a boy that she loved more than life itself.

Sometimes her mind would go back to where it had been before she saved Will—where she was worthless and nobody wanted her. That had been her experience in 1984, before she moved in with the Hoppers. Before she *became* a Hopper. Each member of her family—and the Party—offered her something she'd never had before.

Hopper gave her fatherly affection and learning experiences.

Joyce offered motherly love and nurturing that El needed.

Will saw her as a confidant and trusted her completely.

Jonathan was the best brother she could ask for.

Kat had a no-nonsense approach to *everything*.

Kali taught her how to fight.

Steve was Mom-Friend.

Max was her best friend.

Lucas was the voice of reason.

Dustin made her laugh.

And Mike... Mike was the love of her life. She was sure of that and it made her feel warm and fuzzy inside. When her mind began to slip back into darkness, she'd call him on the Super-Comm and he'd talk to her, making her feel loved and worth something. Will had saved her by giving her a family, but Mike had saved her by keeping her out of the darkness. He saved her every time he answered her calls or offered her a hug or kiss.

She'd taken a long road to get where she was, where she was safe and loved and cared for. And she was reminded of how lucky she was every single day—in the mornings when Hop and Joyce lovingly bickered over the best way to drink coffee, sitting with Jonathan and listening to music while looking at his pictures, telling Will things she couldn't tell anybody else, playing D&D with the Party, and doing... *anything* with Mike.

She also knew that she'd have more heartbreak in the future. She was only fourteen, after all, and there was a lot of life left to live. Who knew what lay ahead on her path of life? Nobody.

Brenner was in a federal prison for life—sentenced for child molesting, abuse, rape, assault, and imprisonment. Or, to be more accurate, sentenced to a thousand years *plus* life. No chance of parole *ever*. And no bail. He had no way out of prison or back into her life. When the sentence had been handed down, she'd cried because it was *over*. Her life-long nightmare was over and she was free of Brenner and she was *happy*.

Okay, and maybe she and Mike disappeared during the resulting celebration to make out in the blanket fort in his basement. And *maybe* she pushed her sister to ask out Steve, resulting in the golden couple that were the happy parents of six. But that was fine with everybody. She was safe and happy and loved and her life was just the way she wanted it. Nobody would call it normal, but it was like Will told her that day back in October. Screw normal.

Normal is overrated.

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**I'M CRYING BECAUSE I'M DONE.**

**THIS DAILY MONSTER IS DONE AND I'M READY TO WORK ON OTHER PROJECTS. SIXTEEN FUCKING DAYS IS HOW LONG THIS STORY TOOK.**

In all seriousness, I kept my daily update promise. I technically missed one day, but that was a day where I literally had no time to sit down at my computer and write. To make up for it, I did a double update a couple days later.

Like I said last time, this AU is going to have a series of one-shots published with it, and that's something I'm already brainstorming for. Feel free to request chapters for that.

In other news, I'm currently brainstorming a 'Will-and-El-are-Hopper-and-Joyce's-precious-twin-beans' story. I just need you guys to help me with something.

Should it be a separated-at-birth story or a twins-move-to-Hawkins-together story? I need to know.

But thank you to everyone who read this story and especially those who cared enough to leave reviews. It takes me a lot of work to make something like this and your reviews kept me going. Thank you all so much, and I'm so excited for season three—July 4, 2019, 353 days after the Starcourt Mall trailer dropped last July.

So long and thanks for all the fish!